

Peacetime - Part 1 of Symbiosis

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Peacetime - Part 1 of Symbiosis

by [Enhydra_lutris](#)

Summary

More Kamuis, more Life-Fiber Hybrids, more high octane fate-of-the-world action! If Kill la Kill was equivalent to the first half of Gurren Lagann, then this is what the second half would look like. At least, that's the plan for this work, it's gonna be a long project. So if you're looking for romance, smut, and cute character moments you'll get them eventually, but there's lots of plot in here too and I hope I can make it all compelling. This is my first work on here, any and all feedback is appreciated!

Story overview to show where we're headed:

Part 1: Peacetime - DONE!

Part 2: REVOCS Insurgency - Most of the way through

Part 3: The Kamui War - not started

Part 4: The Ascendance War - not started

Part 5: Hybrid Gods - not started

Sounds like a lot, right? Well rest assured I won't stop until this tale is finished - I've got a pretty detailed plan for everything and it's gonna be great. There will be fireworks at the end.

Notes

I'm mostly using the dialogue style of the dub because I think it works better in written English (although I'm open to being persuaded otherwise). Also, the main characters all refer to each other by first name although I'm aware that's not typical of Japanese, I figure by this point they're all as close as family so it works.

In which Satsuki makes a long overdue visit

It was a classic Satsuki move, Ryuko decided, showing up on the doorstep unannounced, on an ordinary weekday, in the middle of breakfast. Not that she or the rest of the Mankanshoku family minded, they were more than happy to call the kids in sick from school and spend the morning sitting around the table in the combined kitchen-dining room-den of their modest apartment catching up. The half-eaten remains of breakfast had been forgotten by everyone but Mako (and Guts, who managed to sneak a nearly whole piece of toast off Mataro's plate), and they crowded around their guest expectantly. It might have been Ryuko who did most of the talking, but the entire family was consumed by curiosity as to what she had to say. A week hadn't gone by in which Satsuki wasn't on the news in some capacity, and word had it she was something like the *de facto* ruler of Japan; it was all very intriguing. But more than that, with Ryuko now officially their adopted daughter Satsuki was practically family to. How could they not be excited to get to know a new member of their family?

"I apologize for not coming to visit sooner," Satsuki said once the pleasantries were wrapped up, "Half a year... Well, it's longer than I had planned to stay away."

"Nah, don't sweat it, we knew you were way busy," Ryuko responded, warm yet gruff just how Satsuki had remembered, "We watched whole the Geneva Trials, y'know."

"Yup, and we recorded 'em too - oh and a bunch of other times you and Ira and the others were on the news," Mako added, holding up a laptop coated with stickers of a myriad of colors, "It's all right here if you wanna watch 'em later!"

"Hmm, perhaps I will, I never did see the recordings."

"So, exhonored on all charges, huh?" Barazo, launched in on the topic of the Geneva Trials, which had taken up Satsuki and her Elite Five's (they were referred to publicly as the Elite Five now that Shiro's secret membership had been revealed) first month following the war against the life fibers.

"Well, except for Hououmaru, she was issued extensive psychiatric work to fully deprogram her from... her influence," Ryuko nodded somberly at that, but the others either didn't understand the full context or didn't really remember who Hououmaru was because they just let the comment pass. "But aside from her, it turned out in the end everyone was grateful enough to overlook our war crimes."

"Oh, c'mon Satsuki, we all know you wouldn't have gone if you hadn't seen that coming a mile away," Satsuki pulled a face at this remark, thinking that by now Ryuko should have known that the self-serving, manipulative Satsuki Kiryuin of Honnouji was long gone. She shook her head sadly.

"We killed a lot of people over the course of our mission, Ryuko. If the world wanted to punish us for it, I would have gladly accepted the sentence. Not only that, it was nice to finally tell our full story, and see how the world reacted to it," The Mankanshoku family nodded at this, although they knew that there had been some choice omissions in the

story, mostly personal details about some of the key players who wanted to avoid the public eye. First on that list was Ryuko, about whom almost nothing had been said aside from what she looked like and what specifically she had done. Satsuki actually thought this might have been a mistake in retrospect, for it only inflamed people's curiosity until people around the world were demanding to know who The Girl Who Saved the World really was.

"You know what I really liked was the part where Houka and Shiro showed all the scientists the footage of all the fights," Mataro exclaimed, "I'd never seen the one with you and Ryuko in Osaka, that was so cool! I think my favorite part was when you knocked over the tower."

"Aw yeah, the good ol' days eh Satsuki?" Ryuko quipped, and Satsuki let out her trademark lilting chuckle. That battle had been her confirmation that she had created in Ryuko an expendable Kamui user who was her equal. Her nuclear option. And that moment when Ryuko had returned Bakuzan to her, that was... nice. Satsuki hadn't expected it, and back then she had hated unexpected things even more than she did now, but she'd felt a deep sense of pride knowing that she'd won the respect of such an indomitable woman. More unexpected even than that, for the first time in years she wasn't sure if she was comfortable with dying in the process of achieving her goal. And when she'd felt Ryuko's blood in Junketsu and saw how *she'd* felt about that exchange – well, she hoped there was no outward sign of the sudden fluttering she felt in her chest on remembering that.

"I hope you aren't still getting into fights so frequently, Ryuko," Satsuki quipped dryly, and Ryuko, who had been lounging with an arm across the back of her chair, held up her hands defensively.

"Huh? Well no, I-,"

"Nah, Ryuko never fights anyone who can't fight back, and now there's nobody who can fight back against her, right Ryuko?" Mataro cut in enthusiastically, looking to Ryuko admiringly.

"Yeah, what he said," Ryuko relaxed again, reaching over to ruffle Mataro's hair. "Although I did one time stare down a couple of seniors who were giving Mataro a hard time, but once they saw the red," She twirled her red streak illustratively, "They were all apologies."

"Mmm, that only makes sense," Satsuki said, "I hope it hasn't been too tough on you all, with everyone knowing who you are. I know that's not what you wanted, and I did my best to make sure you would be able to live normal lives." She referenced what Ryuko had said to the crowd that gathered to greet them on the shores of Tokyo bay after the sinking of Honnouji Academy: *"Everyone's giving me the credit, so I won't be modest: I did save the world, me and Senketsu, that is. But I don't want any fame or fortune for what happened here. Being free to live your life how you want, I think that's worth saving, but it's something I haven't got the chance to do. So that's what I'd like to do now, if it's not too much to ask."* Satsuki had never seen Ryuko so subdued, and especially never seen her ask permission. The adulation of the crowd seemed to have shocked her; her eyes were glassy and her voice soft and tremulous despite her smile. But it had been so heartfelt that over the following month as

Satsuki and the elites laid out the entire story to the world, they respected her wishes and kept quiet about her life without even consulting each other about it.

“I don’t think Barazo or Mataro or myself have had any problems, what about you girls?” Sukoyo said.

“Well, it’s weird. People are really nice nowadays, but they never seem to know how to act. You can tell they’re trying to treat us like normal, but they aren’t very good at it. Fer instance, they won’t even take my money at the coffee shop, so I just shove it in the tip jar and run,” Ryuko answered with a chuckle.

“Are you really so surprised?” Satsuki said, “They aren’t going to forget you. If that’s all though, I’d consider you lucky. There’s plenty out there who believe you’re a goddess, or something similar. They’d never give you a moment’s peace.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Y’know they already won’t leave me the hell alone,” Ryuko groaned, “So many letters, you’d think they’d have realized by now that I don’t wanna visit the Pope or whatever.”

“Free trip to Italy though,” Barazo quipped.

“If you’d like to visit Italy, or anywhere else for that matter, the Kiryuin fortune is as much yours as mine,” Satsuki said, “You shouldn’t seriously consider any of their offers, anyway - the important thing is to avoid legitimizing them in any way. Unless you want the world to think you’re Jesus, which could come in handy I suppose,” she joked back in case Barazo thought she hadn’t gotten that he was kidding. This was a new trick she was practicing in hopes of combating her rather severe public image.

“Yeah I think I’m good on that one,” Ryuko said.

“Indeed. And what about the paparazzi? They’ve been quite merciless to the elites and me.”

“They were pretty annoying until I started flipping over their news vans whenever I saw them,” Ryuko said, with a dismissive wave of the hand, “It took about a week, but they eventually figured it out.”

“They did get some pretty good pictures of me and Ryuko before that though,” Mako cut in with her usual verve.

“Pictures? What kind of – wait, I can imagine. I can have a team of lawyers on finding whatever tabloid took those and get them expunged –,”

“No no really it’s fine!” Ryuko said awkwardly, her face flushing up a little, “That was months ago, nobody cares about that anymore.”

“Are you sure? It’s no problem at all.”

“Yup, positive,” Ryuko said, and Mako affirmed that, saying, “It’s no biggie”.

“Well, it’s good to hear your powers seem to be stable.”

“I’m at the peak of superhuman health, what can I say?” Ryuko chuckled, back to cool and casual, “at least I think I am, Houka and Shiro are always saying I should come by their lab for a checkup, but I’ve been putting it off.”

“You know, you really should...”

“Well, nothing hurts, and they aren’t mad about it or anything. You’re not gonna nag me about this too, are you?” Ryuko said in a kidding tone, but Satsuki could tell she was serious underneath that.

“Of course not.”

“Good, cuz we’ve already got a mom around here, and you just got here and you’re on my case more than she is.” Everyone had a good chuckle at that one, even Satsuki, though she was just a little worried that Ryuko’s joke contained a shred of truth. *Ryuko will be Ryuko after all, she won’t do things how I would, and I just have to get used to that.*

“Still, it’s nice that you guys get to see them so often.”

“Oh yeah, it’s like twenty minutes by train to their lab so they come by all the time.”

“And they are so cyuute together,” Mako gushed, to chuckles from everyone, “always bickering but you can tell they love each other under it all.”

“I am well acquainted with that, I had to put up with it for four years you may recall. Although you really should see them working in the lab together, they’re a well-oiled machine.”

“That only makes sense, considering they were in college for like two weeks before they dropped out they must really know their stuff,” Ryuko said.

“Mmm, there was nothing left for them to learn from it, so I’ve heard. They know what they’re good at, can’t fault them for that. And what about the others, do you see any of the rest that often? Tsumugu and Aikuro both work at the lab too, but I know your friendship with them has been... on and off, so...”

“Nah that’s all water under the bridge. Tsumugu is my MMA instructor, so I’d say I see him pretty damn often. We get along great now. And Aikuro’s actually a lot better now too,” Ryuko said, and Satsuki’s eyebrows crept upwards in surprise.

“Well that’s a relief. His reputation was less than spotless where you were concerned.”

“Oho yeah I know what you mean, but now that he’s got women his own age to chase after he’s not so bad. He’s like that stereotypic cool but sketchy uncle, you know what I mean.”

“Actually, I’m not so sure I do. Is this a common social phenomenon?”

“Uhh nah, it’s mostly just a joke but every so often you see a real one,” *Man she’s out of touch, I guess that’s what you’d expect but still it must suck to have to learn all this simple shit.* “Well, anyway, he’s brought around like three or four girlfriends in the six months we’ve been here.”

“Yeah they’re like women version of him – It’s pretty weird actually,” Mako added.

“Mmm, I can imagine. Well, if he’s happy with that lifestyle and they are as well then good for him, especially if it makes him more fun to be around for you all.”

“You really are a new Satsuki, aren’t you? Once upon a time you would have said he lacked ambition.”

“I still might, but if that’s his ambition, then what do I have to criticize?”

“I suppose so. Oh, and on that topic did you know Tsumugu got himself hitched?”

“Hitched?”

“Married,” Mako said in explanation, “Yeah he got married like a month ago. Apparently, he’d had a girlfriend in Nudist Beach all through the war and no one ever knew because they were both so serious they never let on even once!”

“Why, I had no idea,” Satsuki said, letting out a breathy laugh of genuine astonishment, “And he didn’t have a wedding or anything? I know he didn’t just not invite me – Houka and Shiro would have told me.”

“Oh no they just had a little dinner with just us and a few people from the lab and Nudist Beach – still can’t believe they called themselves that,” Ryuko said, “and when we were all seated he just told us they were married. At first nobody even believed him.”

“Well I’d believe it, that’s very like him.”

“No yeah it totally is. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll meet his wife, Aoi, eventually. She’s way too serious for her own good and is like always reading. You’ll get along great. Aside from them, Takaharu and Omiko are in college in Tokyo so we’ve gone to visit them once in a while –,”

“And don’t forget Ira!” Mako interrupted.

“I was getting to him Mako, don’t worry,” Ryuko smiled back, “Yeah he’s a few hours away by train so we don’t see him that often, but he’s been by plenty and went to look at his family’s ironworks once. He said he also does work for you too, didn’t really say what but that’s alright.”

“Oh, he mentioned that? I’m surprised he even said that much. Gamagoori is actually my head of security, he works remotely so that nobody can find his identity or trace anything to him.”

“No shit,” Ryuko responded while Mako made an extended “ohh” noise, “Wait, you still need bodyguards and shit? Who would even want to try anything, everybody loves you, right?”

“It’s just a precaution, one can never be too safe,” Satsuki replied with the didactic air of someone repeating a proverb. *Technically it’s true. No need to worry them with all the rest now, Ryuko wouldn’t take it well.*

“Makes sense,” Ryuko said, “It’s like with the boys and their lab, why let his talent in that department go to waste?”

“Indeed. If you get that, then it shouldn’t come as a surprise to you that all of the former elites are still working with me.”

“Wait, all of them? But I thought Shiro and Houka owned the lab with Aikuro and Tsumugu.”

“And Nonon is the CEO of Sony now isn’t she?” Mako asked, almost at the same time.

“And I thought the Sanageyama boy was touring Europe going to martial arts tournaments,” Barazo said, putting a thoughtful hand to his meaty chin.

“All of that is true. Nonon took over the Sony megacorp as heiress to the Jakuzure dynasty – because I placed her parents and older brother under house arrest for the rest of their natural lives. She is currently running the tech giant into the ground the same way I am doing the Kiryuin conglomeration. In a few years all her dynasty’s misbegotten wealth will be spent on charitable works and building projects, and the factories and other raw materials will be sold to small, manageable companies run by people with their priorities together, and she will retire.”

“Geez, when you said she’d be taking over the family business I hadn’t thought it would be a hostile takeover,” Ryuko quipped.

“It wasn’t so hostile as you’d think, nobody was really in the mood to say no. Now Uzu, yes, he is competing in tournaments in Europe. But with tengantsu and shingantsu he’s essentially unbeatable to ordinary humans, so he just fights exhibitions matches and coaches other fighters. What he’s really there for isn’t the tournaments though; in every country he meets with the heads of state, oligarchs, or whoever holds power and acts as my high-level diplomat. His combat skills have proven invaluable, especially with the Americans and English when he had to stand up to their despots.” The table now rang with a chorus of “ohhs”.

“Wait, you trust Uzu to with all that?” Ryuko said with a chuckle, “Like, no offense to the guy, but I didn’t think he’d be able to sit still through all the meetings and shit.”

“Peaceful diplomacy is ninety percent personality. I can assure you Uzu has the brain power for the other ten.”

“Okay, that’s fair enough, I’ll accept it. And I bet Houka and Shiro’s lab is also under your control as well.”

“Well, technically it is government owned, but before the government was up and running I was their first donor. And they still report all their findings to me before anyone else. And believe me, that arrangement is working out well for you; if we didn’t have the world’s best life fiber scientists in our inner circle we wouldn’t be able to background check other scientists studying it and you’d have all sorts of disreputable characters claiming to be scientists trying to get their hands on you.”

“Geez, alright. So, you guys have been rebuilding the government, dismantling megacorps, doing diplomacy with other countries, and researching the life fibers. Sure sounds like enough to keep you busy.”

“As a point of technicality, I’m also working on my PhD. Either way, I know you accepted my apology for staying away for so long but -,”

“-Wait, hold on, you’re getting a PhD too? What the fuck Satsuki how do you even have the time!”

“Delegation Ryuko, there’s no real trick to it.”

“Yeah alright, you keep saying that,” Ryuko joked snarkily. By now Mako had finished her plate and had moved on to Ryuko’s, and Barazo and Mataro were picking at their half-finished breakfasts hungrily. Satsuki hadn’t failed to notice this, and after she told them they didn’t have to stop eating for her sake they finished with relief. Sukoyo stood up then too, telling Satsuki that she would fix her up something. Satsuki started to tell her it wasn’t necessary, but Sukoyo had already put bread in the toaster and was busily cutting an orange. When she finished with Satsuki’s breakfast and the others had taken second helpings, the conversation turned to the Mankanshoku’s lives in Kanagawa. Rinne High was apparently working out well; Mataro had already made a strong impression with the local delinquents even as a freshman, thanks in no small part to the skills acquired when he survived on his own during the war. Mako’s bookkeeping experience from her time as fight club president was paying off too, she ranked top of her class in mathematics and not too far behind in other subjects either. Ryuko seemed fairly ambivalent about the whole thing, Satsuki suspected that she wasn’t finding it any more interesting than she had her previous schooling. At least she had friends this time, a small group of kids who either weren’t afraid of her fame or were enamored by it. They all had lots of stories to tell, and Satsuki was charmed by the quaint peacefulness of it. She could have sat there listening all day.

It was about ten O’clock when their conversation was interrupted by a buzzing on the intercom. Mako leapt up, clapping her hands together, but nobody else looked too surprised or excited.

“Mail’s here!” Mako shouted, running over to the intercom and shouting into it, “We’ll be right down!”

“Do they always let you know when the mail arrives?” Satsuki asked, standing up with the rest of the family as they began putting their shoes on.

“Well, we get a lot of mail,” Ryuko answered, “C’mon, you’ll appreciate this.”

Down in front of the apartment a medium-sized delivery truck was parked, the driver standing by its rear door expectantly. Ryuko was the first one out, and when he saw her he bowed deeply at the waist.

“Lady Ryuko,” He quavered reverentially. In turn, she groaned and straightened him out by the shoulders, giving him a friendly pat when he was back upright.

“How ya doin’ Touma? Another full truck for us?” He nodded in response. “Hey, I got someone for you to meet.” She motioned to Satsuki, who was standing on the curb with the rest of the family. Satsuki raised an eyebrow as she stepped up. “Touma, meet Satsuki Kiryuin. Satsuki, this is Touma Itou.” Touma’s eyes goggled and his aged, stooping shoulder trembled as they shook hands.

“The L-lady S-satsuki?” He stammered, “I-it is an honor, My Lady.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Satsuki replied with a warm smile.

“Alright, stand back now folks,” Ryuko said, waving a hand to direct them back to the curb a few yards away from the truck where the Mankanshoku’s were standing expectantly. When they were in place Ryuko threw open the rear door with a metallic clunk, revealing cardboard boxes and letter bags stacked to the ceiling. She began efficiently unloading the truck into an open parking space while Satsuki watched with openmouthed surprise (for Satsuki just a slight parting between her lips constituted an expression of utter shock) at the sheer volume of correspondence. Once she was done unloading she gave Touma another pat on the back and sent him on his way.

“Alright, now usually Barazo unpacks this stuff and then it just sits here all day until we get home from school and sort it, but today we’ll just do it now, so you can see what’s inside,” Ryuko said, slapping her hands together as the truck ambled off. Satsuki had to admit she was dying to see what was inside; she’d gathered that it was fan-mail, but she hadn’t expected such a volume. *I don’t think I get even half this much, but then I never see it since it all goes to my publicist.*

“And they just let you leave it here?”

“Well yeah, its basically a feature of the street at this point. Besides, they know who it belongs to.”

“A feature... Wait, how often does this happen?”

“Every day except Sunday man,” Ryuko said, tearing off the top of the first box with her bare hands and beginning to rifle through rows of carefully wrapped paintings. *Oh, in that case I don’t think I get even a tenth of what Ryuko does,* Satsuki realized. “Hey stand back alright?” Ryuko barked when Satsuki began walking forward to check out the paintings.

“I don’t understand, why do we have to stay over here?”

“One time there was a letter-bomb, so we have Ryuko open them over there for safety!” Mako said with undue enthusiasm.

“A letter-bomb? From who?” Satsuki shouted with alarm.

“Who knows? That’s the sort of stuff you have to deal with when you’re famous, I guess,” Ryuko grunted, bringing the first box over, “this one’s clean, take a look.”

As Satsuki had expected, the box contained a profusion of artworks from fans around the world, in all manner of styles. There were Ryukos drawn in manga and western comic book styles, Ryukos painted in exquisite portraits, even Ryukos painted like religious devotionals, with halos pointing out behind Senketsu’s shoulder spines. Also present were plenty of paintings of Mako, Satsuki, the Elites, some combination of the above, and an unfamiliar looking dark-haired, scruffy man that Satsuki realized was supposed to be Senketsu, as interpreted by people who hadn’t gotten that he wasn’t human. And that was only the beginning; over the next hour they unpacked so many paintings and sculptures that Satsuki lost count, and they soon began to spill out from the parking spots so that traffic had to swerve around. There was clothing too, some for every member of the family, and plenty of random objects and gifts too. While they were working pedestrians paused to watch, and with some encouragement from the family many of them began perusing the artworks and taking ones that appealed to them. Ryuko had moved on the letters now, skimming through them quickly and precisely, tongue sticking out a little in concentration. While she worked she mumbled to herself, “cult shit, cult shit, cult shit, real person, cult shit,” and laid the envelopes into piles based on that. Whenever she came upon one with money in it she tossed the bills to whichever pedestrian was nearest, which was most commonly received with a great deal of bowing and scraping but every so often with a hug, which always brought a little smile to her face even when she was getting worn out. It was without question one of the oddest rituals Satsuki had ever witnessed, but as she watched the locals hurrying off with their painting and little statues of The Girl Who Saved the World cradled in their arms she was sure she could feel a sort of connection between them and Ryuko. It reminded her of nothing more than the feeling she’d had on the shore of Tokyo bay the day of the graduation ceremony, and that only made sense.

The Mankanshoku family made light of the work, probably in no small part because Ryuko had taken the boring task of sorting the letters upon herself. By the time everything was sorted, they had spent a great deal of time gushing over the higher quality works, and Satsuki had joined in. Some of the standouts were an oil portrait of Ryuko that was nearly indistinguishable from the real thing, even getting her gear shaped pupils right, a set of stylized soapstone sculptures of Ryuko, Satsuki, Mako, the Elites, Aikuro, and Tsumugu whose bases fit together so that they all posed together, and a shockingly lifelike picture of Ryuko and Satsuki kissing which she really didn’t like looking at but which Mataro described as “pretty sick, actually” until Mako slapped him around a little bit. Satsuki couldn’t help wondering aloud what would even compel someone to send someone something like that. Ryuko nonchalantly told her it was far from the weirdest thing they’d ever gotten. Eventually everything had been sorted, but the passersby had barely made a dent in the piles of

paintings, even the good ones. As for the letters Ryuko had sorted them into two messy piles: one a mere foot and a half deep and the other spilling up almost to her armpits.

“So, what do you do with the rest?”

“Well, the clothing goes to the local clothes drive, which I believe was set up by the Kiryuin Foundation, so thanks for that, the paintings and shit go to the local souvenir shops who sell ‘em to tourists, and the letters...” She gestured first to the larger pile, then to the small, “Those go straight to recycling, and these go to our publicist and he sends out form letters to everyone.”

“Oh, so you do have a publicist,”

“Well, he actually approached us when he heard Mako and Mom were trying to read them all themselves. He lives around here, works for us for free too, you know.”

“I see,” Satsuki said, pondering for a moment how odd it was to hear Ryuko refer to Sukoyo as Mom, although it was technically correct since the Mankanshoku’s had officially adopted her, “Then, you won’t mind if take a painting for myself, will you?”

“Help yourself, hell, take as many as you can we sure don’t need ‘em.”

“I’m afraid there’s just one I had my eye on,” Satsuki said, picking it up from where it was stacked. A detailed but still highly impressionistic watercolor of Honoujji, with a corresponding letter explaining that it was made by an artist who had been on the Tokyo waterfront when the Cocoon Sphere Genesis happened, depicting the first thing he’d seen when he came to after being returned to Earth. The sky was dark and stormy, the sea chopped by monstrous whitecaps, and the broken towers of Honoujji bleak and dark, but despite it all the scene was awash with color. Crimson trails flowed through the sky; the rest of humanity returning to life, but one among them, streaking right down towards Honoujji, outshone all the rest with brilliant golden flames. And it was matched by a bold floodlight that shone out from Honoujji area, illuminating the storm clouds with brilliant, heavenly beams. The painter confided in his letter that he had no idea what was happening in the picture, but something about the image was so marvelous that he couldn’t get it out of his head.

“Ooh pretty,” Mako gushed, “That’s lady Satsuki for you, she’s got a taste for the finer things.”

“Yeah, good pick,” Ryuko said, cheeks just a little rosy. The artist may not have known what the painting was of, but Ryuko sure did. She was touched that it was the moment Satsuki chose to take with her, even if she’d never admit it, “That’ll look great framed.”

“Indeed. I already have the perfect place in mind for it.”

In which Satsuki makes a long overdue visit

Chapter Notes

I've moved this to the second chapter because not everyone cares about worldbuilding and you don't really need it. Feel free to skip and you'll figure everything out just fine.

Although Kill La Kill is decidedly sparse on worldbuilding and very fluid with its rules, the context clues pieced together through the show provide us good indication that Honouji Academy is only somewhat more dystopian than the rest of the world. Where is all the journalism about the human rights violations at Honouji? Why didn't any national military intervene on the tri-city raid trip? Why are Ragyo, Satsuki, and other scions of vast megacorps treated like royalty? Why are roving gang-armies of hundreds of kids rampaging across the countryside? When Rei Hououmaru says in the OVA that theirs is a world where the strong trample the weak without any shred of sympathy it seems to be an understatement of how dysfunctional the setting is. Answering these questions opens up possibilities for a new near-future sci-fi setting far beyond the scope of the original series.

The year is 2064. None of the problems threatening modern society have improved, in fact things have gotten a whole lot worse. The number of functional democracies left in the world could be counted on one hand; dynastic megacorps, despots, and oligarchs rule over the rest with iron fists. In Japan the semblance of public order is maintained only by the military academies that police the cities under oaths of loyalty to two great clans: the Kiryuins and the Takaradas. In this neo-feudalist society, the value of human life is almost nil; rulers give scarcely a thought to their subjects besides how they could be of use, blood sports are common, and beneath the rich and middle class lies a vast underclass that barely scrapes by. Meanwhile, urban sprawl and utter environmental negligence have devastated much of the world. The great old cities are drowning, deserts expand at a slow creep across the land, and in the face of this grave threat the world has turned a blind eye. Everywhere there are signs that things cannot continue as they have, but the correct combination of power and will to act that could make a change does not seem to exist. Nobody is saying it, but a great many people are finally, belatedly realizing that things aren't going to just get better. Humanity has reached the peak of its evolution, the only place to go from here is down.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. The whole world was whisked away with scarcely any warning to experience the sublime horror of the Cocoon Sphere Genesis. When they were returned to Earth an eternity or a mere instant later, the whole thing was so inconceivable that at first nearly every human on earth was convinced that they had just had some sort of hallucinatory stroke. That was until they talked to each other and realized that they all remembered the same prison of flesh and needles and the same gruff, vitriolic woman's voice that cut through it like a pure beam of hope; then they realized that they had been saved from

a fate worse than death by that mysterious woman whose voice none of them would ever be able to forget. Everything had been returned to the way it was, but life could never be the same again. Around the world a sort of spiritual sense rose in a great many people; in the face of such a brush with calamity, it felt like a second chance to make things right. At last, power and will to act had met in the indomitable women and men of Honoujji. What's more, the power of the life fibers, like nuclear power before it, could not simply be set aside and forgotten. Together, these great forces now at last stood poised to transform the world and save it all over again.

This is the story of how that happened.

In which Ryuko and Satsuki spend a night on the town

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was on Satsuki's second visit to the Mankanshoku's that she inadvertently learned how Ryuko had really been passing the six months since the war ended. This time, the family had wrung out a promise from her that she would stay for the weekend, and since she couldn't justify being idle for so long she brought along Soroi and a mountain of paperwork. When Saturday evening rolled around, she gladly turned the guest bedroom over to Soroi to spare his ageing back, and so found herself coiled up on the living room sofa. It must've been about midnight when she was shaken awake by night terrors, the usual ones, after which she just couldn't get back to sleep. Her mind was busy with nagging thoughts from the day before. It had been a pleasant day by any measure, one spent ambling around the local park (Barazo and Sukoyo had offered to take them someplace more upscale, but she'd graciously turned that down), then splitting off with Ryuko and Mako to check out the shops in the mall and catch up. It felt like an eternity since she'd spent so long doing so little, probably a month since her last get-together with the former elite five, and although she was still unused to shopping just for the fun of it she didn't feel so awkward with such enthusiastic coaches.

But there was a detail that was troubling her: they were *dating*. You couldn't ignore it; on top of all those little glances and touches that went on just a moment too long, they were constantly picking out clothing for each other the showed a scandalous amount of skin and shared a changing stall even when they were trying on bathing suits. What's more, and this might've been most uncomfortable, Ryuko, who was famously modest even when she learned to synchronize with Senketsu, let Mako grope her just about wherever she pleased. Satsuki knew from the days of the war that Mako was the only one who could get away with that without at the very least bruises, but she'd thought nothing of it then. And to top it off, when she'd been given a tour of the apartment, to see what the family had made of the Kiryuin Foundation stipend they received (Satsuki had offered to give them enough to live at any lifestyle they might desire, but Barazo and Sukoyo had graciously turned that down, saying "we learned our lesson on that one") she couldn't help but notice that Ryuko and Mako's room had but a single bed.

And how did she feel about all this? During the day Satsuki had known she was happy for them, that they were adorable together, that they deserved to be happy together. Now, in the late-night gloom with the oppressive thrum of a less than effective AC unit grinding at her ears, she wasn't so sure. The burn of jealousy clawed at her chest, and Satsuki realized that she wanted what they had together. This was the source of the listless feeling that had been growing since the end of the war; though she'd kept occupied first with the trials and then with rebuilding the country and getting her degree it still felt like she was sleepwalking through it. She could stab out in any direction and find something worth fixing, and all she had to do was tell people her name and sign a check and it would get done, but then the next day there would be something else to do until it all blurred together. She didn't

have anything or anyone that really satisfied her, a part of her life that was just for her and not for the sake of others. She'd tried, but where was she even supposed to begin? She'd been taught all her life etiquette and how to speak properly and taught herself how to make others do what she wanted, but how could she learn how to just talk to people? They never seemed to understand, or maybe she could never make herself understood, even when she was saying something simple and every-day. Even with Soroi and her elites, she could never quite tell them she was feeling listless, lacking direction, lonely. Only Ryuko had understood, only she had that same furious demand for action, a perpetual motion towards something, something Satsuki had assumed was the completion of her mission but now knew extended beyond that. But did Ryuko remember, or had her mission somehow come to a close for real this time?

*I know it's wrong to live for myself, especially when I have such a chance to do so much for the world, but I wish I knew how to have just a little bit of that? How does Ryuko do it? She's the happiest I've ever seen her, she's in love, and she's got a whole life to look forward to after that and I... I feel like everything important in my life is already over and I don't know what to do. And here I thought she wanted to be with me, I know she did, at least for that day we spent on the Naked Sol when we finally made up and I felt her blood in Junketsu. Was it really that short? She knew it was wrong, and back then she was so frustrated by that she almost didn't care, but maybe it was just a passing fancy brought on by something I said? It felt so much more real than that though. Agh, dammit Satsuki, stop thinking like that – it doesn't matter what she felt then, how much you think you understand her – that you would even entertain the notion proves there's something wrong with your mind. Admit it: **Ragyo** did something to you, and you can't bring yourself to face up to it. Pathetic –,”*

Satsuki was broken from her self-disgusted reverie by the sound of footsteps in the hall, someone coming her way. Her well trained ears immediately pricked up; the bathroom was in the other direction, so whoever was up was doing something specific, maybe something interesting. She'd expected to hear Mako or Barazo going to the fridge for a midnight snack, but the footfalls were fast, precise, heavy, and doing a bad job at staying quiet. *Ryuko*. Satsuki kept still, eyes an almost imperceptible crack away from shut, waiting to see why Ryuko was trying to avoid disturbing her. When she came into view in the middle of the living room Satsuki shut her eyes and tried to appear to be sleeping, but not before she got a glimpse of Ryuko fully dressed in her white trainers, bomber jacket, and loose athletic shorts. Her hair was spiked up not unlike the way it used to whip around when she activated Kamui Senketsu, showing its shiny crimson underside. *So, she is sneaking out*, Satsuki thought, not sure if she was angry or oddly charmed, *You haven't changed a bit, have you Ryuko*. She paused for a moment there, presumably to check if Satsuki really was asleep, then did something Satsuki hadn't foreseen. Satsuki heard the glass door to the narrow balcony slide open and popped open her eyes just in time to see Ryuko vault of the railing in one smooth motion, a silhouette against the dull magenta of the city night that was gone so quickly Satsuki wasn't sure she'd really seen it. Ryuko could obviously survive such a fall, she was still as super-human as ever, but Satsuki bolted over to the balcony anyway, just to see her jogging along the near-empty street seven stories below.

If she knew I was awake and is trying to lose me, I'd better get moving. Satsuki had already decided that she would follow Ryuko, although she wasn't quite sure why. She envisioned herself bursting in on Ryuko in a bustling bar, chewing her out for being derelict in her commitment to her schoolwork and for violating the trust of her adopted family – but no, that

wouldn't do. Maybe she'd just pull her aside quietly and have a nice, calm chat about what she was up to. Hopefully she would be able to keep her temper, it would kill her to go back to her old antagonistic relationship with her estranged sister. She quickly grabbed everything she'd need: shoes, phone, wallet, jacket, hair ties. It was lucky that she chose to sleep in shorts and an undershirt, so as soon as her shoes were on she slid out the door and bolted down the stairwell. Fortunately, Ryuko was still visible down the street, and when she turned at an intersection Satsuki had a solid idea that she was heading downtown. She couldn't catch up with her, but she could take shortcuts.

Ryuko wasn't hard to follow, she was running at a roughly human rate and using the main roads along the most obvious route. All Satsuki had to do was jog along one street away from her and check at each intersection that she was still on track. She was sure she wouldn't be spotted: regular training ensured her athletics were just as sharp as ever, and she could blend into the night and the other pedestrians unerringly. Street by street the tree lined boulevards and bland but quaint apartment complexes gave way to the shining storefronts and cool metal of the center city. She was getting into a good rhythm after a few minutes, so she almost missed it when Ryuko suddenly stopped, tilted her head, and turned off in a completely different direction at a breakneck pace. Satsuki had no time to ponder what had set her off, as she quickly ground to a halt and set off after her. This was perhaps the most difficult part of her night's exercise because while Ryuko ran with reckless abandon, dashing between pedestrians and even smoothly hurdling over cars with a speed only she could achieve, Satsuki had to hang back and jog, not just because she didn't want to look odd to pedestrians but also because she knew she couldn't keep up. It was grueling, but she managed to keep Ryuko mostly in sight until she disappeared down an alley. Peering down the alley, Satsuki saw something she hadn't expected at all.

"Back off, or else," Ryuko said flatly, staring down a hulking, unshaven brick of a man who brandished a short switchblade. Behind her, pressed up against the wall, stood a messy-haired young man with glasses and the look of being too drunk to be out on his own this late.

"Get lost bitch, this is none of your business."

"I'm making it my business. Last warning." Rather than respond, the mugger thrust out his knife straight for Ryuko's gut. Satsuki gasped, no longer worried about drawing attention to herself, but there was no cause for concern. Somehow the knife was in Ryuko's hand, and she slid right up into his face tauntingly. The red in her hair glinted like garnet.

"Oh god, it's you!" He hissed in a panic, falling to his knees and shouting that he was sorry.

"Yup. I warned you, you know. Now you don't get off so easy." She pushed the mugger with one hand, and his back hit the ground like he'd been tackled. Recovering from having the wind knocked out of him meant that he couldn't run while Ryuko turned away, wrenched a rusty pipe off the wall, and wrapped it around his torso and arms until he was totally contained. With the long ends of the pipe threading out from his sides he couldn't even stand up. Satsuki couldn't help but be impressed by the inventiveness, and by Ryuko's conscientiousness as she asked the young man she'd saved if he was able to get home on his own, then called the cops to pick up the mugger. She was even more flabbergasted when she heard her exchange with the police operator.

“Hey it’s me... I’m alright, got a guy for you... yeah, he tried to mug a kid and tried to stab me... nobody’s hurt, he’s restrained, and the kid called a friend to pick him up... Uh huh... Yeah you can come pick him up whenever, he’s not going anywhere... alright, talk to you soon.”

Once that was taken care of, Ryuko turned back out of the alley and Satsuki barely had the time to pull her head around the corner. Fortunately for her, when Ryuko walked past she didn’t think to turn, or she would have seen Satsuki pressed up against the cool brick of the wall in a less than dignified manner. Instead she tilted her head and set off at once again at an inhuman sprint. Satsuki sighed, and after a quick stretch she set off after her.

She needed to see what Ryuko was going to do next. But there was no way even she could keep up with her forever. And the night was still young.

For the next few hours (the adrenaline of the breathless chase made Satsuki uninterested in the time) Satsuki did her best to keep up as Ryuko bustled around the city and the nearby suburbs intervening in other situations that could make use of her talents. She stopped a few more muggings and armed robberies, pulled a few people out of car wrecks, even sprinted a man in the throes of an overdose to the hospital. After that one Satsuki was sure she’d lost track of her for good, Ryuko had departed at inconceivable speeds the moment she realized an ambulance wouldn’t arrive in time. One moment she was there and the next there was only a gusty shockwave blasting trash around the street. Satsuki, crouching behind a dumpster almost a block away down the deserted street, had sighed and relaxed her shoulders for the first time that night.

Nothing left to do but return home, but she didn’t feel right about it. So many questions about why and how Ryuko had taken it upon herself to police the city, and more importantly she needed to figure out how she felt about it. She knew something about it didn’t sit right, it felt odd that she had to sneak out, and if she was sneaking out even when guests were over she must’ve been doing so frequently. So she was probably not getting enough sleep, and Satsuki knew full well how that could drag down the rest of one’s life. What’s more, her detached, dead serious attitude throughout the night was disconcerting, Satsuki hadn’t even thought it possible for Ryuko to suppress her emotions and she couldn’t shake the sense that something was wrong. On the other hand, how could she criticize, what even was there to criticize? This was exactly what someone with incomparable strength, speed, and reflexes should be doing with their time, and Ryuko was by all indications very good at it. Satsuki felt a vicarious pride from the heaping gratitude Ryuko scarcely accepted, and the groveling terror of wrongdoers that she barely acknowledged.

She’s like a superhero.

Satsuki was about to get up and start walking back to the apartment when she heard a faint whistling, which was followed by a tremendous whoosh of air that slapped her face like a cold breeze. She peered out from her hiding place and, no surprise, Ryuko was standing there as if she’d never left, minus the man she’d saved. As simple and serious as ever she tilted her head to the side once more and was off, and with a degree of relief that surprised even herself Satsuki followed on after her. Their night’s travel continued, and Satsuki took

care to note any signs of expressiveness on Ryuko's part. Only once did Ryuko show a shred of happiness, when she busted through a window to perform CPR on an elderly woman who'd just had a heart attack, restoring her to consciousness before the ambulance had arrived. Satsuki had felt herself choking up then and was happy to see Ryuko smile momentarily as she eased her patient into a chair to wait for the paramedics. Likewise, there was only one time when Ryuko got truly angry, when she intervened on a rape. That one was more than understandable, Satsuki couldn't even bring herself to look, but from where she stood around the corner she could hear Ryuko deliver such a punch that the thin clink of the perpetrator's teeth on the asphalt echoed for almost a minute. She could also hear Ryuko's heavy, seething breaths and an utterly disgusted growl that nearly reached into the shouting range. Once again, she felt such a turmoil of sympathy for Ryuko for subjecting herself to this repeatedly and pride in her for the very same thing that she had no idea what to make of it all.

It was about 45 minutes after that event, the sky now showing early signs of dawn, when Ryuko suddenly stopped in her jogging and, rather than tilt her ear towards the next spot of trouble, she turned all the way around with a deeply concerned look on her face. She took out her phone, scrolled for a moment, and slapped a hand to her forehead.

"Ah crap, a big one tonight's the last thing I need," She muttered to herself and then, just as suddenly as the last time she engaged her top speed, she was gone. Satsuki slumped down frustratedly; this time she had definitely lost Ryuko. It was about time to go home anyway, she figured, but then her phone buzzed repeatedly until she had no choice but to answer it. Once she had there was no doubt where Ryuko had gone.

**Emergency Bulletin: Highway Access bridge #7 has collapsed. Avoid all travel in the area until further notice. **

The situation on the bridge was as bad as Satsuki had feared. Crowds were gathered at both sides, cars, rubble, and rescue boats were scattered in the river below, and on both sides of the collapse and all across an isolated, still-standing central column a mess of suspension cables ran like spiderweb, ensnaring dozens of cars and even a bus. Satsuki hurriedly threw a wad of cash to the taxi driver who had gotten her to the edge of the crowd in exchange for the promise that he would wait for her to come back and waded in urgently. On the ride over the night's exercise had finally caught up with her, and she stumbled occasionally, provoking angry responses from all around. She did manage to get to the front eventually, standing right along the police barricade where paramedics were busy ushering survivors out of the way. As she scanned around, she couldn't help but notice Ryuko's name coming up frequently in the crowd's breathless chatter, and plenty of the names and titles that she was known by as well. She was definitely here.

"Where's she gone this time?"

"She's on the center, getting that blue van, you see there?" The bystanders were pointing, and when Satsuki followed their fingers and spotted it: a van teetering on the edge of the island platform. It shifted once, twice, and then as Satsuki watched in amazement it sprang up, sailing in a wide parabolic arc towards her side of the gap. Now that it was in the air, she

could clearly see Ryuko holding up the bottom of the van, a pale blip in the early morning light. They hung motionless for a moment, then plummeted to a skidding halt accompanied by a cheer from the crowd. She set the car down and paused just long enough to make sure the family scurrying out of the van were unhurt, departing once again with a running start.

“Er, why is she in her underwear?” Satsuki asked, almost unsure if she’d said it around.

“Lady Ryuko always strips down when she’s doing a big job. So she doesn’t rip her clothes, is what I think,” An answer came from a young man leaning over the barricade a couple people to her left.

“Oh, I see.”

“Not from around here, are you? That’s funny, you look familiar.”

“I’m just in town visiting relatives,” Satsuki said with a chuckle. It wouldn’t do if she was recognized, but it didn’t seem likely with this fellow.

“Well geez, I hope they aren’t on that bridge-oh! There she goes again!”

What Ryuko hated most about losing Senketsu was the silence. Being in constant connection with him had filled her mind with an entirely new set of thoughts, a constant chatter between them that was busiest when they were synchronized and in the midst of action. It was almost never on topic, she’d remember something delicious she’d had for breakfast that morning, he’d remember a seagull they saw a few days ago eating the same thing from the trash, she’d ask him if he thought the architecture at Honnouji was as depressing as she thought it was, he’d respond by humming a tune she’d never heard whose general mood made his thoughts on the matter clear. By the end she could barely recall what it felt like to have her head all to herself and being forcibly reacquainted with it was like being dunked in the arctic ocean. Normally, she could find adequate substitutes in the Mankanshokus and her few friends from school; Mako in particular was almost as good as the real deal, but there was nobody to talk to while sailing through the air over the wreckage of the bridge. She was down to her final target, the bus hanging over on the other side, and she’d already decided that she’d have to toss it to deliver it back where she started because she couldn’t climb back up while carrying it, so what was there left to think? The silence reminded her of dull dreaminess that came before sleep, but rather than being a soothing departure from the day’s worries it ached. She hadn’t chosen to relax her mind, there was a part of it she just couldn’t access, a piece of her that was ripped out. Running up against it was like running her tongue into a sore spot where a tooth had been knocked out (she’d experienced the sensation a couple times during the war, unlike other people’s her teeth grew back).

“Buckle up!” She heard herself shout over the screams as she robotically wound one of the thick metal ropes around the bus like a Christmas ribbon. Now she wrapped a cable around her legs, ignoring the burning abrasions the coiled metal left on her skin, and with both hands swung the bus underneath her and released it in a smooth underhand throw. It soared overhead in a lazy arc, fortunately staying upright the whole while, but Ryuko didn’t see this and barely noticed the hush falling over the crowd. Now she called up the full extent of her

speed, scrambling up the cables and leaping over to the column and then to the other side in a fraction of a second. Going this fast was rarely necessary, but it made for a good distraction nevertheless; it was like her body was finally operating at the same speed as her mind. The bus hadn't even passed the column by the time she turned around and braced, so she had enough time for one pressing observation to cut through the silence.

That's coming in a little faster than I thought.

When the bus came down, Ryuko disappeared beneath it with a fountain of blood and a gasp from the crowd. Only the footsteps of the paramedics rushing to help could be heard for a moment as it slowly crept down from a 45-degree angle to resting flat on the ground, and when it did Ryuko slumped out beneath it. If Satsuki hadn't known better she would have been sure Ryuko was dead, for her feet had been ground down to bloody stumps, her hands were raw from being run along the metal, and most freakish of all her neck was sharply bent, spouting blood from a vast rend that nearly pulled her head clean off. But she was alive, picking herself up on legs that shouldn't have supported anything, wincing with a mouth that tricked blood in a steady stream. Satsuki was reeling, she felt lightheaded like she hadn't since the war, but she resisted the urge to look away. *Have I gotten soft? I've seen much worse, hell, I've seen her chopped in half. Still, the pain must be unimaginable, look at what she puts herself through.*

"Whoa, are you alright?" Her acquaintance asked, and then called out to a kindly looking middle-aged woman standing next to her, "Hey, can you help her? She's feeling faint." Once the woman noticed that Satsuki was having trouble keeping her feet she was quick to grab her shoulders and ease her forward onto the barricade, where she could lean and catch her breath.

"It's lady Ryuko, isn't it? Don't worry, she'll be fine in just a moment," She said, and Satsuki managed to keep watching to see how true that was. Ryuko's wounds were seething, blood rippling as her lacerations sealed. Her feet rebuilt themselves like they were made of clay, and her neck, well, she gave it a casual roll like she'd woken up with a crick in it, and with a wet *thunk* that made bile clench Satsuki's throat it snapped right back into place, the wound sealing up in an instant. Ryuko blinked and stretched, and she was back to normal. The crowd erupted into cheers, surging past the barricade, but Satsuki stayed behind in stunned silence.

My god, she's even more powerful than before, isn't she?

The sea of heads around Ryuko swallowed up the survivors disembarking the bus (miraculously unhurt, save for a few bruises), but they parted in a ring around her, staring in awe and shouting their thanks. Satsuki too was in awe, in awe of the reverence Ryuko had inspired in them. *If she's trying to convince them she isn't the second coming, she's doing a bad job.* Someone passed up Ryuko's clothing, and a paramedic extended it to her, bowing on one knee. Satsuki was sure Ryuko wouldn't appreciate being treated like royalty, but she didn't even seem to notice him even as she scooped up her clothes. She strolled off, eyes far away, hand clutching the air over her heart, and Satsuki realized immediately why she seemed so distant. She turned away, both so that Ryuko wouldn't see her and because she finally couldn't bear but to turn away. Besides, she needed to get home before Ryuko, and

she had a lot to think about. By the time she got back to her taxi she was choking up for the second time that night, a bittersweet sadness welling up in her chest from the experience. The image of Ryuko standing half-naked and dazed in a pool of her own blood, surrounded by the adoring crowd, backlit with dreamlike hues by the siren-lights, was stuck in her head. Still, it didn't stop her exhaustion from catching up to her in a wave, and she nodded off in the back seat within minutes of leaving the bridge. When she finally got back to her couch, the sun scraping a thin line above the horizon, she dropped down and passed out without even thinking to check if Ryuko had gotten back before her.

Satsuki awoke with a brutal cramp in her lower back (which wasn't even from running all night, it was just from how she slept), and she lay squinting into the sun for nearly 15 minutes waiting for it to pass until she could finally roll over and check the time. When she did manage it, she groaned a little louder than she intended.

"11:30 already?"

"fraid so. C'mon sleepyhead, I've got coffee brewing if you want," It was Ryuko, seated at the kitchen table. Satsuki turned around over the back of the couch to stare blearily at her, and she smiled back with a shining, toothy grin, her hair even messier than usual. Her laptop piped out tinny video game music, and the coffee machine was bubbling loudly, nearly finished with the pot. Aside from that, though, the apartment was practically still, even Guts appeared to be missing.

"Where is everybody?" Satsuki asked, kicking a blanket she was sure she hadn't put on from her legs. She stood and stretched out the soreness in her back while Ryuko refocused on the game.

"They've gone down to the shop to get lunch – took Soroi too. Don't worry, they'll bring something back for us."

"I can't believe I slept through them leaving," Satsuki chuckled, hoping that Ryuko wouldn't ask why she was so tired. She planned on mentioning Ryuko's night-time hero work at some point, but after she decided what she wanted to say about it. And how to salvage the fact that she followed Ryuko without her permission; that had not been very sisterly of her.

"Ah don't sweat it, I basically just got up too. That was some night, huh?" Ryuko looked up, and though she was still smiling and her eyes still shone with good humor they suddenly pierced Satsuki like daggers.

"I uh – and what do you mean by that?" she stammered.

"Satsuki Satsuki," Ryuko said, waving a hand, "C'mon, I knew you were behind me the whole night, gimme a little credit. Why else would I keep my speed down to normalish levels?"

"Oh," Satsuki muttered, crestfallen.

“No ‘oh’, what did you think?” Ryuko gave her a playful poke on the shoulder. She had to imagine Satsuki would be proud of her, it’s what she would be doing if she had Ryuko’s powers, after all. She was elated when Satsuki’s disappointed frown turned into a soft, sad smile.

“I thought I was doing a pretty good job staying out of sight.”

“Hey, no jokes! First off I’m serious about this, second off I can hear things happening blocks away - there’s no way anybody can sneak up on me anymore.”

“Oh, so that’s how you were able to find people who needed your help then. I was wondering.”

“Yeah. Now come on, what did you think?”

“Coffee first,” Satsuki said, a desperate deflection she would never have stooped to under normal circumstances. Ryuko’s face suddenly fell, and she paused the game.

“You-you don’t approve. What did I do wrong?” Seeing the confusion in Ryuko’s eyes, Satsuki let out a defeated sigh and sat down, still composed but obviously deflated. She hadn’t meant to hurt her, and at her core she was... proud of Ryuko for taking the initiative on her own. She needed to soothe over feelings before they got hurt, but still she wasn’t in the business of saying things she didn’t mean, not anymore.

“I wouldn’t say I disapprove. I’m just confused, and I have questions.”

“Oh, okay then. Ask away, I guess,” Ryuko was still wary; she’d been hoping for praise, fearing a stern talking-to, and now she wasn’t sure which was coming. Satsuki was just happy to have the ball back in her court, so to speak.

“You do this frequently, don’t you?”

“Every night,” Ryuko affirmed with a serious nod.

“Do the Mankanshoku’s know? No- they must. Mako at least has to know.”

“Oh yeah, they know. Actually, I talked with them about whether I should even show you, but I knew you’d notice when I left. Mataro suggested I try leaving out my bedroom window, but we couldn’t figure out how to get the screen off,” Truthfully Ryuko had really wanted to show Satsuki, but she hadn’t told any except Mako that. She’d only asked the other Mankonshoku’s to see if they would be able to talk her out of it, but they’d been less than helpful on that front.

“I see,” Satsuki said thoughtfully, then paused for a moment. While she was thinking of how to proceed Ryuko was become more obviously agitated by the second.

“Satsuki what’s your deal? You said you don’t disapprove but you’re still acting pretty damn weird.”

“If you’re doing this every night, when do you catch up on sleep?”

“Oh, I get it,” Ryuko mumbled, “Yeah, I catch up in class, what did you expect?”

“Ryuko...-,”

“Well, what? When else am I supposed to?”

“But your grades-,”

“They’re in the toilet, I know I know. But it’s not like they’d let The Girl who Saved the World flunk out.”

“You shouldn’t use your influence that way.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Miss Kiryuin,” Ryuko snarked back, crossing her arms and staring down into her lap sulkily. Satsuki had a point, one she knew all too well, but she couldn’t back down. So the guilt became anger. *I didn’t want a lecture, and I definitely didn’t want to make you mad. Why couldn’t you just be impressed? I guess it wasn’t realistic to think that my little heroics would impress Satsuki Kiryuin – one of us basically rebuilt the country and the other can’t even keep one little city safe. Still, if you think you’ll get me to stop by telling me I’m not being responsible you got another thing coming.*

“There’s no need for that Ryuko,” Satsuki said as calmly as she could manage, determined to be conciliatory. “Actaully, I’m sorry, I think I’ve said things wrong. May I start again?”

“Yeah, you’d better, cuz I’m starting to think you want me to stop saving people’s lives, which is...”

“-Not at all what I’m trying to say. What you’re doing here is good, a very fitting use of your power. But-“

“-But-”

“-But I thought you wanted to go to college, have a career. It’s not going to be easy if your grades are as bad as you say.”

“I do, I do. I mean, I want to.”

“You make it sound like it’s already too late,” Satsuki said, thinking of what she could say to reassure Ryuko that she could turn it around if she just engaged on her studies, but was cut off by a grim chuckle from Ryuko.

“You want to know the truth of it?” She asked and, not waiting for a response, continued with the defeated air of a confessional, “I haven’t even applied anywhere. Mako’s gotten accepted at a few places, and I missed all the deadlines. So that’s it, really.”

“Oh Ryuko,” Satsuki sighed, a sudden upwelling of sympathy urged her to go hug her estranged sister, do something to make that gloomy, glassy look go away. But the tension in her shoulders said that admitting even that had been a stretch for Ryuko; she wasn’t ready to accept pity. “I-I don’t know what to say. I didn’t think you’d give in so easily.”

“Yeah well!” Ryuko blurted, “What am I supposed to do? Besides, even if I did go what would I study? What would I do when I got out? How can I work a normal job now after everything that’s happened? I want to, I do, but it’s all so complicated, and I’m rotten at school. I don’t even know anything I can do well besides fighting and lifting things a-and people need me to do that so that’s what I’m gonna do,” She crossed her arms resolutely

“But it doesn’t make you happy,” Satsuki said plain and clear, and something clicked in Ryuko’s head. She’d been so intent on getting Satsuki’s approval because she wasn’t happy, she needed someone to tell her she was making the right choice.

“Well, apparently that’s something we just have to deal with sometimes!” Ryuko was almost yelling now for some reason, “I thought you of all people would understand that, Satsuki Kiryuin.” At that, something clicked in Satsuki’s head. Ryuko was struggling just like she was! The sudden realization that Ryuko also felt trapped by her obligations to society filled her with a sense of kinship, like she felt exactly how Ryuko was feeling. That sense was an infrequent visitor to Satsuki, but not an unwelcome one. She couldn’t resist it anymore, she stood and flung her arms around Ryuko’s shoulders, burying her cheek in that bushy, shining hair. Ryuko let out a little gasp and, very stiffly and with a faintly red face, returned the embrace.

“I do understand,” Satsuki said softly, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know how to say it. I just want you to be happy, but you’re entirely right. You have a duty to use your powers to help others, and *it is* the same as what I do.” Ryuko had been glowering, averting her eyes, but now she looked over to Satsuki and saw a warm smile and a hopeful gleam in her eyes. She’d been seeing, or rather expecting, the old Satsuki, gearing up for a confrontation that was completely unnecessary.

“T-thanks Satsuki,” She smiled back, “I knew you’d get it.” Satsuki hummed in response, and the vibration of her throat on Ryuko’s shoulder suddenly made her uncomfortably aware of their close proximity. “Alright, that’s enough. Get off a’ me, sap,” she said with an awkward laugh. Satsuki complied, disentangling her arms quickly, though still as gracefully as ever.

“So, am I forgiven for being so dreadful at explaining myself?” She asked, making the nearly imperceptible shift between her more serious, emotional tone and her relieved, casual one.

“Well, that depends,” Ryuko replied, “Do you think how I’m using my powers is cool?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And you aren’t going to tell me that I should stop?”

“No, in fact I completely agree that you’re obligated to continue.”

“Well then good, you’re forgiven. Although you really ought to practice talking to people normally and not giving orders to them.”

“Believe it or not I am,” Satsuki said with a chuckle, “It’s hard to find people to practice with in my position.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m already sick of having to deal with people kowtowing and it’s only been six months.”

“You’ll get used to it, frankly you’ll have get used to it to like it or not, they’re not likely to stop. And besides that, since you aren’t going to stop your nightly escapades either you still have a problem when it comes to your future.”

“Yeah. So, what should I do?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Satsuki said, “But I can help you decide. First off, are you certain that you do want to go to college? There’s no reason why that’s a requirement for living the type of life you want.”

“I – yeah it isn’t technically, but I still want to try it, experience it - y’know?”

“That’s completely understandable, but you should know you do have other options. For example, I would certainly be able to find a position for you in the Kiryuin Foundation that was suited for your talents. We could even fly you around the world to disaster zones where you could put your powers to good use, if you wanted.”

“Now that,” Ryuko said thoughtfully tapping her chin, “It makes sense, I’ve actually had a similar thought. But that’s – I don’t know - maybe a little too far. Like I’d just have to keep doing that forever. Maybe if nothing else works out.”

“So, college then, for now.”

“Yeah, I guess. Even though I don’t really know what I’d do there.”

“Well, you can always go undecided for your first semester. So then that leaves the question of where you’d go. The way I see it, you can either take a gap year and apply next year, but that will still be hard with your grades. The other option, and this is only if you’re okay with it, is to use your influence to just get an acceptance now. I’m sure if I made a few calls we could get you in anywhere you wanted.”

“Then that’s what we gotta do, fuck it.” Ryuko said decisively. She was starting to get into the idea, remembering dreams of a successful college career full of friends and great memories that she’d nursed during her delinquent years. Satsuki’s characteristic seriousness was rubbing off on her, or maybe challenging her to not look weak and noncommittal, “It’s not the worst thing in the world, if I just use it this once, and then do better from then on.”

“Exactly,” Satsuki said, although she worried if she were being hypocritical considering how frequently she used her fame to her advantage. *It’s different when I do it because it’s not for my benefit, right?* “Now, where were you thinking you’d want to go? Probably wherever Mako decides, right?”

“Nah, Mako’s going over to Kansai so she’s close to Ira. Don’t want to step on any toes there.” Satsuki’s eyebrows shot up and she tilted her head slightly, her equivalent of reeling in confusion.

“But I thought you and Mako were-,”

“Dating? We are, yeah, but it’s different between us. We have one of those ‘If we’re not married by the time we’re thirty’ deals, y’know?” Ryuko looked down into her coffee cup with a small, secretive smile.

“I’m afraid I do not know,” Satsuki said, “Is this a common arrangement amongst young people these days?”

“Oh, uh no it’s not, it’s kind of one of those things you hear about but don’t know anyone who does it in real life. And it looks like we probably won’t need it considering how into each other those two are. Oh boy, you sure look confused by this one. Well, I know you have a question, spit it out.”

“So... do you love her or not?” Satsuki asked, trying to pierce to the core of what Ryuko meant by this all. Her late-night musings on a crush Ryuko may have at one point harbored for her were far from her thoughts; instead she felt a sort of sinking dread at the prospect that she might just be incapable of understanding this concept. Someone couldn’t love two people at once, could they? Experience had taught Satsuki that those who claimed to were only interested in debauchery and pleasure. There was no way Ryuko and Mako could be like that, Satsuki had seen to it personally that they would be bound together inseparably during the Fight Club incident, so how could they be so casual about their relationship?

“Blunt as ever, I see,” Ryuko snarked, “Don’t worry, it’s cool, we had to explain the concept to Mom and Dad and boy that was way more awkward than this. Here’s how it is: Mako and I love each other, but we’re best friends first. So it’s okay with me if she loves someone else too, because I know she’ll always be there for me whether it’s as best friend or girlfriend. And vice versa, of course. Does that make any sense?”

“On a logical level, it might. It still seems very strange to me though.” *What would I do if I met someone who claimed to love me and someone else at the same time? That would have to be one hell of a woman to make her worth sharing.*

“It’s definitely not for everyone, I’ll give you that,” Ryuko said with an awkward chuckle, “Anyway, now you know why I won’t be following Mako to college.”

“Well, that still leaves you with a host of options. Does anywhere in particular stand out?”

“I *was* thinking that it would be nice to go someplace in the country, but I don’t want to go so far away that I couldn’t come home and visit from time to time. So then my other thought was maybe Tokyo University, even though its right in the middle of the city, because it’s so big that I could probably find somewhere I fit in. And also, my nights there would be put to good use, I’m sure of that.”

“Indeed they would. Well, if you want countryside close to home your best bet is somewhere up in North Kanto, where Uzu grew up. I must say though, I never pegged you for a country girl.”

“I’m full of surprises. Plus, I’ve lived in cities all my life, it’d be a nice change of pace.”

“I do agree, it was refreshing when business called me out to the countryside back in the old days. On the other hand, Tokyo has its advantages. The campus has basically every educational advantage you could want, and it’s very diverse too; it’s been the forefront of my new initiative to bring the tuition and acceptance back down to something that lower-class people can afford so you wouldn’t be so stuck in with rich kids. I will admit that I’m a little biased because that’s where I’m getting my PhD, but I’m not gonna tell you it’s the clear superior choice. It just has advantages is all.”

“See, that sounds good too though!” Ryuko exclaimed with a little lighthearted frustration, “I don’t know which would be better.”

“That’s alright, you should take some time to research it then. And while you’re at it you should look into what you would want to study, since you also haven’t decided about that either.”

“Yeah, totally,” Ryuko said. Her eyes which had look so glassy moments before now gleamed with their usual enthusiastic energy. Satsuki made everything seem so possible, narrowing her whole dilemma down to just a series of simple questions. After all, she was a graduate student, and some kind of genius to boot, so she knew what she was talking about, “Mako and I will start looking at it right away.”

“I’m glad to hear it. You can let me know when you come to a decision and I’ll make the arrangements personally. Do you think you could have at least some more ideas by next weekend?”

“Uh sure, but why then? What’s next weekend?”

“Oh nothing, I just-,” Satsuki began awkwardly, “I was thinking since we both know you won’t stop your nighttime work when you’re in college, that I should help you improve your study habits so you can get by on minimal sleep. So, if you’re okay with it, I’d like to visit more frequently, maybe every weekend if I can.”

Ryuko beamed at that suggestion, looking up with that puppy-dog gaze that made her go ever-so-slightly cross-eyed when she was feeling particularly friendly. “Are you kidding?” She said, standing up, “C’mere”. Satsuki complied, embracing her sister briefly. “You’re my sister, I’m their adopted daughter, that basically makes you a Mankanshoku as well. And even if you weren’t, you’re welcome anytime, you know that.”

“Well, I had an inkling that I might be,” Satsuki smiled back, “But don’t think this is just going to be all fun like this weekend, I’m dead serious that you’ll be studying more than you ever have before, and I have plenty of work to get done as well.”

“And *I’m* dead serious that you’ve got a lot of catching up to do since you’ve been living under a rock all this time so we’re definitely watching at least two movies a day and you’ll just have to work that into your schedule.”

“Alright, but don’t be offended if I work through them; I’m a very efficient multitasker, you know. Now, let’s see about getting some of that coffee, I’d like a cup or two before it goes cold.”

By the time the rest of the family got back from the shop with bags of takeout under each and every arm the altercation and serious talk had been almost completely forgotten, as Ryuko did her best to sell Satsuki on all the different movies, TV shows, books, and etcetera that she wanted to show her. Satsuki ate with enthusiasm, crowing internally, *we managed to have a real conversation without tearing at each other’s throats and without me thinking anything unsisterly about her! I think maybe I could get used to having Ryuko as a sister.* Ryuko, as she always did, ate only a fraction of her portion and handed the rest of it off to Mako. Her mind was fixated on something quite different: the lingering ghost of their close embrace from before that set her skin tingling. *Goddamn her why does she have to be so gorgeous? Or better yet, why does she have to be my sister?*

Chapter End Notes

I’m interpreting the red life-fiber streaks in Ryuko’s hair as always covering the entire underside of her hair, but only really being visible when it’s lifted except in that one forehead streak that peeks up. Pretty sure that’s not canon, but it is cool, so it’s what we’re going with.

Also, this is the last chapter I had prewritten before I started posting, so now I will be uploading these as I finish them. I’m pretty busy so I’m shooting for maybe one a week, but things could change. I do have it outlined for a good long while though, so don’t worry more is definitely coming.

In which a routine checkup becomes a theoretical physics lecture

Chapter Notes

Oooh boy here comes the big exposition dump for you all. Don't worry the next chapter is gonna be literally all fluff before we get back to the plot. I just hope there's enough character flavor to keep you going through all the other stuff in here.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, which are you more upset about: that we’re wasting a Saturday or that there might be needles?” Satsuki broke the silence that permeated the back seat of the bulletproof luxury sedan, and Ryuko sat up with a start, glaring at her defensively.

“Who said I was upset?” She said, clearly a little upset, “And how do you know about the needle thing anyway?”

“Houka recorded everything that happened at Honoujji, you know that. I remember specifically saving that conversation between you and Aikuro in case I ever needed a phobia to use against you.”

“Man, you were a piece of work back then, weren’t you?”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“Well, to answer your question it’s wasting a Saturday; I had some classic American films from the 1900s lined up for you today. Also getting up at seven but you warned me about that. Still not keen on the needles though.” Satsuki smiled at that one and made a little “mhm” noise. This would be her seventh weekend with the Mankanshoku’s, and after much nagging she had finally coaxed Ryuko into stopping by the lab for a checkup with Shiro and Houka. A part of her was just as loathe to go as Ryuko, the last six weekends had been some of the happiest times she could remember, and she didn’t want to give up any of it. Satsuki was finally beginning to feel like she understood where she fit in their family dynamic, playing in equal parts the roles of pampered guest, overprotective big sister, and naïve younger child who needed everything explained to her. And it was so nice. This felt like the thing she had been missing from her life, and whenever Monday rolled around she found herself daydreaming in her office, wondering what the Mankanshoku’s had in store for her next weekend. Of course, she’d never let it interfere with her work, but to say it was on her mind was an understatement. She’d even gotten to the point where she could get gifts for them; it had started with seeing things in store windows and thinking *Oh, Ryuko would love that*, but before long she was arriving with something for everyone. They always said they didn't need anything, but considering how happy they were when Satsuki got just the right video game or piece of jewelry or camera equipment (Barazo had taken up photography as a

hobby, and surprisingly not all of his pictures were of women and some were even pretty good) how could she resist?

On the other hand, though, she was looking forward to this checkup in an odd way. She had a lot of unanswered questions about Ryuko's alien biology and powers, and she knew Ryuko did too though she'd never admit it. Besides that, Shiro was very excited about something new they were working on, something he wouldn't even mention except in person and about which he wouldn't share details on even the most secure networks.

They'd been driving through the suburbs near Tokyo for a while when they reached the research lab, signaled first by a wide grassy expanse that Ryuko assumed was a park until Satsuki said, "We're here," and they pulled into a wide, tree lined arch with a signpost reading *Kinue Kinagase Memorial Research Complex*. Beyond the trees the campus spread out across many acres of lawns, gardens, and ponds interspersed with buildings and plazas. Whoever designed it had a great aesthetic sense in both landscaping and architecture; the buildings had a unified, modern theme with smooth white concrete and wide, airy windows. It looked clean but welcoming, and of course very scientific.

"Damn, this place is bigger than I expected."

"Shiro and Aikuro wanted it to be a 'one stop shop' for all the research that would advance our goals. See over there on the left is the Biomedical Engineering department," Rather than a single building the department Satsuki pointed to was divided up by many courtyards and greenhouses. "On the right is the Quantum Physics building," This one was much larger, an office complex with a huge, ring shaped particle accelerator in the center. "And in the back is Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering." The final large department was a mess of garages and warehouses that buzzed with activity. Most of it was obscured though, behind the glittering glass skyscraper in the center of the complex that housed the visitor center and main offices. As the centerpiece, it was by far the most overwrought with spangly strips of lights and vine encrusted terraces splattering it with color. Ryuko wasn't at all put off by its extravagance though, especially considering what Satsuki's previous building projects had looked like. Satsuki was still pointing stuff out while Ryuko examined the skyscraper, "Then there's quite a few one-building departments scattered between them, and all those lower buildings around the edges are housing for the scientists who came here from abroad."

"And what about that one by the entrance?" Ryuko said, pointing out the car's rear window to a mid-sized building that looked like a cross between an apartment complex and a shopping center, perched to the left of the entrance arch.

"That is a homeless shelter," Satsuki said succinctly, but explained further when she saw the confused look on Ryuko's face, "The campus exterior is open to the public on principle, you'll notice there's no gates on the entrances. But when we first opened this area was so impoverished that the homeless were swamping us. So, we put in that building. It's got more than food and beds, too: There's a doctor's office, career advisers, even a rehab clinic for those with addictions."

"Wow, you're a real woman of the people now, aren't you Satsuki Kiryuin?" Ryuko said, and though it sounded slightly snarky Satsuki could tell she was genuinely impressed underneath

it.

“I’m better at it than before. To be fair, I’ve had good teachers,” Satsuki smiled modestly, and Ryuko blushed just a little, knowing that she was probably the first of those teachers, the one to make the old Satsuki realize she couldn’t treat people like pawns, “And it worked, too. Not only did us being here completely revitalize this neighborhood’s food and retail businesses, but quite a few of the lab assistants you see on campus first came here to use that shelter; I even recognize a couple of them. Perfectly capable people who were never given a chance before.” Ryuko was openmouthed; what a complete reversal from the woman who had believed that the common people were destined to be enslaved to the rulers, who had shouted from her throne that the purpose of wealth was to be doled out by the ruler to manipulate their servants! Without really meaning to she recalled how ardently she had hoped to pull the old Satsuki down from her throne, humble her. How she had fantasized about humbling her in... other ways too. She never dreamt that that woman could be rebuilt so thoroughly. Ryuko decided she couldn’t keep looking at Satsuki right then, so she turned back out the window and kept examining the campus.

“Alright Satsuki, I’ll admit it,” she said as they pulled into the visitor center’s roundabout, “You’ve been up to some pretty cool stuff the last seven months. Not quite as cool as me, of course,” She quipped to make the praise just a little less glowing, “But almost.”

“I can’t take any credit for this,” Satsuki said, “It really is Houka, Shiro, Aikuro, and Tsumugu’s vision. There’s equal part of each of them here, all I did was provide funding.” Their chauffeur, a beefy security guard with an ill-concealed Nudist Beach needle gun on his belt, opened first her door then Ryuko’s, and they stepped out into the blustery November breeze. “Where are you headed?” Satsuki said as Ryuko started off purposefully to the left.

“We’re here for a checkup, right? So Biomedical building.”

“We’ll be meeting Aikuro in the main office first,” Satsuki said, directing her back inside the main doors. The inside of the visitor center was just as lavish as its exterior; if it weren’t for the touches of postmodern styling throughout it would’ve looked almost baroque. Myriad fountains and gardens and statues and displays about the projects going on around the complex were scattered throughout an atrium that stretched several stories up to a lofty skylight. In the center stood a large statue of a woman in a lad coat who looked very familiar to Ryuko; she realized after a moment that it must be Kinue Kinagase, Tsumugu’s sister after whom the complex was named. The placard beneath her was emblazoned with big, bold lettering that read *Don’t Stop the Experiment*, her last words and by all indication the complex’s motto.

“-Ooh yes, I would go with the violet. That would look great with, well, with what you’re wearing right now,” A dashing blue haired man who Ryuko recognized instantaneously was leaning over the receptionist’s desk, practically whispering to the pretty young European woman who was giggling in response. She’d never seen Aikuro dressed up for business, but as usual he pulled it off and looked like more than your average suit. His tie was a little loose, maybe, but that was his one concession to his tendency to disrobe; Ryuko had a personal theory that he had some kind of chronically-itchy-skin condition that explained that. He couldn’t just be that weird on his own, right?

“Do you think? I’m inclined to agree,” The receptionist replied with a thick accent but impeccable grammar and pronunciation, then stopped and looked up when she spotted Satsuki and Ryuko entering, “Hello! Welcome to Kinue Kinagase Memorial Rese-,”

“Oh, I’m sorry Adrienne, these are my clients, there’s no need for the spiel. Although with that I’m afraid I must be going, my dear.”

“Aikuro,” Satsuki greeted him with her friendliest smile, “So good to see you. I’ve brought a friend today.”

“Ahh Satsuki,” He gave her a brief hug, and Ryuko watched with amusement as the receptionist pouted in response, “And we can’t forget about Miss Matoi either, although I’m sure you’re less than thrilled at being dragged out here.” He gave Ryuko a hug as well, which she rejoined with a gentle punch to his shoulder, “Alright, if you’d please accompany me to my office.” Aikuro’s office turned out to be a mere ten yards away, in fact it overlooked the atrium from right near the main doors with wide glass windows. As they entered, Aikuro turned back to the receptionist, shouting, “See you later Adrienne!”

“Have a nice day President Mikisuki!” She replied, and that was the last they heard from her as Aikuro shut the door.

“Hold on, your office is right here? You could have just waited for us in here if you weren’t such a horny bastard,” She dug in on him accusatorially, and Satsuki colored up at Ryuko’s harsh language. Under her embarrassment, on the other hand, she was tickled by it, and if it had been her and Mataro bullshitting back at the apartment she probably would have let out a scandalized giggle. Aikuro on the other hand was unfazed, making a clicking noise with his mouth and pointing goofy finger guns at Ryuko.

“President’s gotta know what’s happening on the ground floor, isn’t that right Satsuki? And besides, she’s out there all day, gets boring for her.”

“Oy vey, I seriously hope you didn’t just hire her for her looks,”

“You never know with me, Miss Matoi, I’m an enigma. Now, into the conference room.” On the back side of his office a door opened onto a windowless conference room - Aikuro did a quick finger scan to get everyone in and when the door shut Ryuko could hear what sounded like very large, powerful locks sliding shut. Once they were securely inside Aikuro pressed a palm to one of the smooth, metallic wall panels, and with an almost silent *whoosh* it popped backwards into the wall and slid away, revealing a small, barren elevator chamber.

“Ooh, secret elevator. What a big, fancy secret agent man you are,” Ryuko mocked him with a condescending tone, like he was a child playing pretend.

“We can take the secret stairway if you prefer, Miss Matoi,” he shot back, but both Ryuko and Satsuki were already stepping in. Once the elevator got moving, sliding smoothly downward, he turned to Ryuko with a far graver look on his face. “Alright Ryuko, what you’re about to see here is the height of secrecy. You are not to discuss it at any time, except with people you have seen in person in this area of the lab, and even then, you can only discuss it with them face-to-face, completely alone, with no devices nearby that could

possibly be recording even ones that you own. For example, Tsumugu and I go out fishing whenever we need to discuss our work down here, but for you it would be best if you didn't ever talk about it except when you are in this area. Are you prepared for that? If you're not we'll take you back up and give you a normal routine checkup and send you on your way, no hard feelings."

"Fuck that, now I *know* I gotta see what you're hiding down here. And yeah, I won't ever speak about it or whatever."

"Alright, so long as you're sure." When the elevator came to a stop Aikuro pressed the button to open the elevator (Ryuko didn't think she'd ever seen an elevator where you *had* to press the button to open the door before) and they exited into a dingy, rectangular room that looked about half as large as it actually was thanks to all the computers that filled it. Beyond that, the room had all the hallmarks of a typical man-cave: plush but beat-up couches, tables with playing cards scattered around so that some of the cards were definitely missing, and of course empty energy-drink cans scattered on basically every available surface. Each side of the room had a hallway in the approximate middle of the wall that lead off into the dimly lit gloom. The sign on the left one read *Quarters* but someone had covered it with a sheet of paper that said "Night Zone", the one in the dead center said *Test Chambers*, and the one on the right was labelled *Storage*; this sign had a piece of paper next to it that read "Remember your safety gear: **This mean you Aikuro**". The conversation between the room's unseen occupants fell to a hush as the elevator doors slid open.

"I don't know if you guys heard, but there's this real fancy research lab above your heads. You should check it out sometime, if you ever get tired of living the rat life," Ryuko said, immediately owning the room as she entered it and prompting a hysterical "Oho shit!" from Houka as he stood up and peered over his monitors at her with a grin. *I've never seen Houka react like that*, Satsuki thought, *No surprise, Ryuko's so cool of course she'd be able to bring that side of him out*. As he came around to greet them Shiro and Tsumugu also emerged from somewhere, Shiro wearing an apron and Tsumugu busily inhaling another energy drink.

"Welcome!" Shiro said warmly, giving both Ryuko and Satsuki brotherly hugs around the shoulders. His broad forehead glistened with fresh sweat, and as usual he had dark bags under his eyes from spending all day fussing about down in this cavern, "I take it you like our humble abode."

"Well, it's a fuckin mess but it actually smells pretty good. What's cookin – Ope!" Ryuko cut herself off when Tsumugu drew near, tensing up and holding her hands up in a loose combat stance. But nothing came of it, he held his hand up for a shake and she dropped her guard and responded in kind. In a lab coat he looked so different from his old combat getup – especially since he'd traded his mohawk for a neat and stylish new haircut with a slick side part. He'd kept the red though, using it to dye up some wings above his ears; since that style was so strongly associated with silvered hair Satsuki couldn't help but think he looked at least fifteen years older than he had during the war.

"They tend to attack each other at random whenever they see each other," Aikuro explain when he saw the quizzical look on Satsuki's face.

“I see. Well, are we ready to begin?” She asked after the pleasantries, “I’m very interested to see what Ryuko’s test results are.”

“First, one quick thing,” Shiro hurried off back in between the computers, and the rest followed him around the corner to a smashed-up kitchenette that both Satsuki and Ryuko couldn’t believe was functional. “I gotta finish dinner,” He lifted a tray of some sort of casserole from the countertop; it was still steaming so apparently he’d just taken it out of the oven. After it had been wrapped in wax paper (“no non-recyclables plastics down here”, he said when Ryuko asked why he didn’t use plastic wrap) and popped it into the fridge he quickly exchanged his apron for a lab coat and one of his trademark face masks and they were ready to go.

The testing chambers quickly brought to Ryuko’s attention that this secret lab was far bigger than she’d envisioned. Each one was at least the size of a basketball court, constructed out of pure white concrete panels, and there were at least five of them. Most of them were completely empty, the first one on the right side of the hall was the only exception, with what appeared to be a broken, charred harness in the center and massive scorch marks spreading out across the floor. She really wanted to ask what that was about, but before she got the words out Houka directed her to the first chamber on the left. Observation chambers for each one, complete with a host of incomprehensible monitors, spread off directly from the test chamber hallway; the actual floor of the chambers was about a story down with an elevator and a stairwell down to each. After some discussion it was decided the Shino and Houka would run the tests and Aikuro, Tsumugu, and Satsuki would sit in the observation chamber. This was in no small part because Ryuko didn’t really want Aikuro down in the chamber with her when she was stripped down to her underwear. “Done that one enough times already,” she said.

When the testing group got down into the chamber, there was a whirr of machinery and some of the floor panels in the center of the room suddenly shifted and spun rapidly, flipping all the way over to construct a miniature doctor’s office minus the walls. It had a sink and a countertop complete with various instruments, a row of monitors and a chair, and what appeared to be a dentist’s chair with a few more machines built into it.

“Whoa, that’s some high-tech shit!” Ryuko said, jumping back a little.

“Mhm, please remove your clothes and have a seat,” Houka said, sitting down at the computers.

“Oh man, I’m getting into some real mad scientist shit aren’t I,” She said jokingly, although Satsuki thought she could hear some genuine anxiety in her tone, if only a little.

“Mhm, please remove your clothes and have a seat,” Houka said again, more tersely, and Ryuko shot him an annoyed look that just screamed *Come on dude*. He laughed a little at his own assholery, then looked back to Ryuko, “Uh, sorry about that. We just have to do some basic biometric scans before we can get into the interesting stuff, I just want to get through these quickly.”

“Ookayy,” Houka drawled slowly, sitting up from his chair. The three up in the observation chamber leaned in intently and Ryuko shifted uncomfortably in the chair as he continued, “the scans indicate that Ryuko is extremely healthy, at least as far as normal human biometrics work on. Her blood pressure is, well, multiple times that of a normal human but everything else looks fine so we’re going to assume that’s just normal for a hybrid. Her metabolism also appears to function at an extraordinary efficiency, she seems to be able to get much more energy out of food than she should. Based on these enzyme readings we’ve also isolated that she metabolizes certain foods much more efficiently than normal humans. Shiro, can you explain that one? Not my specialty.”

“Certainly. She appears to be very good at metabolizing organic acids, citric acid in particular, as well as leafy gree-,”

“Holy shit, that actually makes a whole lot of sense,” Ryuko said, and when everyone turned to her expectantly, she explained, “I’m basically the only person I know who likes eating lemons just on their own. Whenever I suggest it to someone else they always say they’re too sour to be any good, which I never got.”

“So, citrus fruits may taste different to you too as result of your altered digestion. Interesting,” Shiro said, then looked down at the tablet he was holding, “Ryuko tell me if you can, what’s the longest you’ve ever gone without eating?”

“Oh, umm let’s see. It would have to be I think this week in the February before I came to Honoujji, you know, when I was going around from town to town trying to find out who’d killed my dad. I think there was about a week when I was going through some rough neighborhoods in East Kanto. I was out of money at that point, but I hadn’t resorted to stealing yet. So, I think about a week.”

“I see. And you were active all throughout this time?”

“Yup, I had to keep moving. Rough neighborhoods, like I said.” Listening to this, Satsuki felt a lump rising in her throat. She could so easily picture Ryuko as she’d been that first day she arrived at Honoujji Academy, stalking the cold streets with nobody to help her, no home to spend the nights, and she burned with guilt for having not realized the desperation in her face when they’d first met. It hadn’t even been a year ago that she would have been so, so grateful for a place like the complex’s homeless shelter.

“That’s no small feat,” Shiro continued, “Although you forgot about the month you spent comatose after the Covers attacked.”

“Oh yeah. I assumed they were giving me some sort of nutrient paste then.”

“We were at first, but you didn’t seem to need it. Well, what this all shows is that your metabolism is so efficient that you can get away with not eating for as long as you might need. On a biomechanical level – well, it shouldn’t be possible – but it’s marvelous nonetheless. I would say for you a healthy food intake would probably be one meal every other day, and you could probably stretch it to every third day with no discomfort. In fact, you’re actually at risk from *gaining* weight from what would be a normal Calorie intake for a human.”

“Oh double holy shit! Senketsu always used to rag on me that I needed to watch my weight. He could, like, sense things about my health that I wasn’t even aware of,” Ryuko explained for everyone’s benefit, “I don’t think he understood that my metabolism wasn’t typical otherwise he would have told me so.” When she said that Satsuki couldn’t help but notice a conspiratorial glance pass between Aikuro and Tsumugu. She began to guess what they might have been thinking about – it must’ve been something from when Senketsu was alive – but the implications of Ryuko’s biology occupied her mind to a far greater degree. *She barely needs to eat, is basically resistant to any reasonable degree of heat or cold, and can’t be wounded. On a basic survival level, she scarcely needs anything from society. She could wander if into the woods and never come back if she wanted. I’d definitely like to try that for like a month if I had that kind of power.*

“Some of the other abnormalities we’ve noticed: Ryuko’s senses are off the charts, as I’m sure you know,” Houka continued as Ryuko nodded, “Her eye anatomy is more like a bird’s than a normal mammal’s – won’t bore you with the details. Her fingernails and hair seem to grow in short bursts rather than continuously like ours. You can see it on the close scans of her head, should be up on some of those monitors. Oh, and uhh Ryuko, have you ever smoked?”

“W-well yeah a little,” Ryuko said, embarrassed to admit it, “B-but that was years ago, don’t worry.” She looked up at the observation chamber, seeming to be directing that specifically at Satsuki and Aikuro. *The two people most likely to nag her.*

“Yes, there appears to be trace amounts of tar in your lungs. Your regeneration appears to be stopping it from harming anything, but it’s still not able to leave your body. If you want we can give you an inhalant that will dissolve it, it’ll take several doses so we’ll have you take it home.”

“Sure, might as well,” Ryuko said, then after a slight pause, “Well, are we gonna move on to the cool stuff yet? You promised mad scientist bullshit and all you’ve done so far is shine lights in my eyes.” Ryuko did her best to keep the mood light with her petulance, but the harsh white lighting and stark barren walls of the test chamber were beginning to get to her. It was an awful lot like something she’d felt before, a lingering old memory. *Reminds me of dad’s lab when I was a little kid, she shuddered involuntarily, ah hell, depending on what they want to do to me this might really suck.*

“Yes, let’s. We’re still waiting for the hormone data to process, but the computer will take care of that. Shiro, the nerve receptors, if you’d please.” Shiro busily produced a tangle of adhesive stickers like small defibrillator pads and began sealing them all over Ryuko’s body.

“These will keep track of your nervous system’s response to the various tests.”

“Make sense. And what have you got for me here?” While Shiro was working on the pads, Houka had produced a sheet of paper and a pen and handed them over to her.

“It’s a release, giving us permission to publish the data we collect from you in scientific papers. Of course, we won’t use the more sensitive stuff, but because you are the only one of your kind presently alive on Earth we can’t protect your identity like we normally would.

You don't have to sign if you don't want, and this data will stay right here accessible to only us. But, not to get too greedy, but if you let us publish on it we're sure to get a Nobel."

"Eh sure, what the hell. But I get a piece, okay?"

"You want... a piece..." Houka sighed, already knowing where she was going with this one.

"Yeup. Say it."

"A piece of the Nobel Peace Prize. Well, that is just dreadful."

"Yeah well let's see you do better Mister Serious Science Guy. Alright hit me with; what's first."

"You're gonna love this: We'll begin with your regeneration and pain tolerance. First, let me remind you that we will be doing nothing that we haven't seen you bounce back from before, but if we don't know how you'll respond to a certain factor we will make sure it is something survivable by a normal human," He was talking quickly now, speeding through this little disclaimer, "If at any time you feel uncomfortable with the experiment we can stop, just let us know. Got that?"

"Uh, sure,"

"Excellent. Shiro, you may begin the dissection."

"DISSECTION! Wait hold on-," But it was already too late. The handle of a scalpel was already protruding from the soft skin of her forearm, clutched in Shiro's dexterous gloved hands. Then things began happening quite quickly.

When Satsuki saw the fountain of blood leap from Ryuko's arm she let out a quite involuntary gasp. She'd known that the plan for today involved hurting Ryuko quite a bit, Ryuko even knew that on some level although she'd had no real concept of the specifics. As a result, she'd been wondering if she would feel sickened the same way she had on the bridge, and yes, there it was again, although sitting down made her more able to tolerate it. Ryuko, on the other hand, didn't seem at all fazed. In fact, as Shiro fell flat on his ass, his face and torso complete coated in blood, she *laughed*. He looked foolish, sure, but that was far from a natural reaction from someone bleeding profusely, and when Satsuki heard it she suddenly felt even worse. She stood up.

"Well, it looks like they're going to be here for a while. Aikuro, Tsumugu, if you aren't needed here I have some business to discuss," With a shrug, Aikuro stood up and followed, Tsumugu close behind. It was true, she had lots to talk about with them, but also she needed a moment away while she processed her suddenly realization about why Ryuko's response to injury was so unsettling. *That's not a natural response, not a human response to being hurt even if you know it won't last. She didn't used to react this way. But I know who did.* She wouldn't pronounce the exact words, not even to herself, but it was a chilling reminder that her little sister was the same kind of... *being*... Ragyo had been.

Meanwhile, back in the test chamber, chaos unfolded beneath the brilliant spray of Ryuko's blood. Houka immediately dashed over to Shiro and helped him up, shouting to nobody in particular, "Shower Stall!" On that command a panel a few yards away flipped over and became a utilitarian shower with opaque glass panels and a small changing area. Ryuko meanwhile was fighting down her laughter as she pulled the scalpel out of her arm.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. High blood pressure indeed," Shiro said loudly, holding up his hands as he stood. Once the scalpel was out of the way the wound sealed up in mere seconds, stopping the crimson spray. Still, everything within a four-foot radius was dripping.

"That's what you get for surprising me, asshole. Seriously, what was the point of that?"

"We thought you might get squeamish. You do hate needles, and you can't be put under, so we planned to do it like pulling a Band-Aid in case you started squirming."

"Oh, for the love of - does everybody know about the needle thing?"

"Shiro are you sure you don't want a shower?"

"Nah, fuck it, it's just going to keep happening. Get me a bigger knife though, something with teeth preferably."

"Oh sweet Jesus," Ryuko exclaimed, reverting to the old fashioned Christian swear for added emphasis. Despite that first disaster, secondary incisions went a lot more smoothly. The steak knife Shiro settled on cut through Ryuko's unnaturally tough skin much more easily, though he said it was more like rhinoceros' skin than a human's in structure. Eventually, after dumping enough blood thinners to kill an ox on the wound (the countertop was piled high with the little bottles it came in) they cleared out enough to peel back the flesh with some forceps and get a look at it.

"Fascinating," Houka said, snapping a few pictures of the rend, "It appears that the fibers suffuse the entirety of your physical form. Look at how they strain to reconnect." It was definitely odd, Ryuko had to admit, her flesh looked more like magnetic iron shavings than any meat she'd ever seen, and it pulsed and flowed seemingly of its own volition as it let off a faint red glow. She must've never noticed it before because usually the blood would cover it up, "I wonder if it looked like this before your awakening, or if you had a normal consistency of flesh before this."

"Uh hey, you're using weird terms here and not filling me in," Ryuko said petulantly, "What do you mean by 'physical form' and 'my awakening'."

"Your awakening is what we call when Ragyo ripped out your heart and caused you to go comatose for a month, then when you awoke your life fibers became far more active. That's when your super-strength and enhanced reflexes and senses kicked in, as well as your regeneration abilities. As for 'physical form', well that's in relation to a hypothesis Shiro and I are testing right now. It will become clear to you in a moment."

“Alright, weirdo. So, what are the results, then?”

“Well, you’ve seen the first part,” Houka said, sitting back down as Shiro removed the forceps and let the wound close, “So, Ryuko, how would you describe your pain on that test?”

“Eh, not so bad. Three out of ten.”

“Well, that’s just not – Ryuko, your nervous system registered quite an incredible pain response to that. Just a few levels below a broken femur, the blood thinners in particular seem to have produced a brutal sting. You definitely felt excessive pain, the question is just how well you handled it mentally.”

“Well, my scale does go up to having your entire guts ripped out. So, compared to that.”

“Even so, you didn’t flinch once. Your pain tolerance is clearly incredible. But what’s even more incredible: from that one cut you bled almost two times the volume of blood that your body can hold.”

“What? How? Where the fuck is it coming from, then?”

“Where indeed. You see, this is the dilemma we’re trying to solve: your body seems to be defying one of the most basic laws of physics: matter cannot be created or destroyed. We aren’t sure where it’s being created, but your body definitely seems to be creating new blood from, well, nothing. And this isn’t new either; life fibers have been observed to have this property before.

“No fucking way. So how then is it happening?”

“We don’t know. We want to see what happens when we perform some more tests. For the next one, if you don’t mind, we’d like to remove an extremity and see how your body regenerates it.”

“Oh, like a toe or something? Yeah that’s fine.”

“Excellent. Quantum Fluctuation Detection Chamber!” He shouted into the air once more, and this time the floor parted behind Ryuko, producing a cube shaped chamber the size of a lavish walk-in closet. Its walls were made out of something that looked like glass, but Ryuko thought they had to be some kind of plastic because she could see minute differences in its texture and reflection. All along the edges ran a mass of machines and cables whose functions she couldn’t begin to guess at. As it clunked into place and the side nearest to her slid open it lit up with various display lights until the previously bright white room was filled with vibrant multicolors. The effect became even more pronounced when all the other lights, including Houka’s computers, shut off.

“Come on in,” Shiro said, stepping into the container, “Don’t worry about the lights – the main lights emit faint UV radiation and that messes with the instruments. Oh, but if you could grab that little box from the counter, it’s connected to all the nerve pads.”

Ryuko followed him into the chamber, and when everything was ready she sat down on a small stool inside it and Shiro, with a surgeon's precision, sliced through the ligaments of her right big toe until it dropped to the ground in another spray of blood. First, they recorded video of it popping back on of its own accord (Ryuko still would never get over how bizarre it was to move a part of her body that had been disconnected from her, nor how equally bizarre it was to *feel* the part while it was still detached). Then, they cut the toe off again and tried to see if she could pull it back to her body with just her will. It turned out that after a little practice she could, the trick was mostly to visualize it flying through the air and then imagine the feeling of that happening on both ends, and then it would soar back like an electromagnet. Then, and this was the one they were really interested in, they took the toe off and put it outside the quantum chamber. It took a few seconds, but after Ryuko tried willing it to go faster the flesh of her toe-stump began to seethe and bubble, and before their very eyes the toe rebuilt itself, starting first from a white knot of bone, then the rubbery cartilage around it, then the more-fibrous-than-usual muscle and flesh, and finally the skin and toenail to cap it off, all in just a couple seconds. Shiro and Houka both stared in awe as Ryuko did her best to remain nonchalant while ignoring the nearly three inches of her own blood that had accumulated in the basin of the chamber.

"Uhh, did you get that?" Shiro asked, still a little stunned.

"Ohoho yes I did, you're both going to want to see this," Houka said, opening the door allowing them and a little tidal wave of blood to exit the chamber. Shiro's shoes squeaked as he quickly hurried over to Houka's monitors. Houka had flicked one of them on, and in the dimness, he pointed to a series of bars graphs and numbers that were quite incomprehensible to Ryuko. "See, it's quite similar to what you predicted."

"So it is. It looks like a localized hyper-instance of the geodetic effect, but then right here it stops. Do you think the continuation is happening... beyond? What really makes no sense is that it happened inside her body and none of her other tissues show any change – you're sure there was no material loss elsewhere? Body fat reduction, bone rerouting?"

"Take a look. Besides those two instances the rest of her was as still as a statue."

"Uh, hello? Please stop speaking nerd when there's monolinguals around," Ryuko said, leaning into the screen. She saw a small drawing of a generalized woman's body in the bottom left corner of the screen, with two bright red dots on it: one on the toe that had been cut off, and the other right where the heart was, "That supposed to be me?"

"Yes, that's you. Those two dots are what we're talking about. They're what you would call gravity fluctuations, the same kind that make the gravity of our planet and other objects in space but much smaller. What makes these ones special is that what they most closely resemble is those found around black holes, or what we suppose the ones around wormholes would look like."

"Wormholes. So, my body is literally teleporting new blood and like, toe meat in from somewhere," Ryuko said with an almost exasperated tone. Whenever she used her powers, especially before Senketsu's death, she felt an elation in the back of her mind that never fully went away. Put into words, they would be most easily summarized as: *This is so fucking cool*. But hearing where they came from, that put entirely different nagging thoughts into her

head. The same dark thoughts that had consumed her when she'd awoken from her coma, not nearly as strong of course, but still there.

"Well, that's the gist of it. As for where, this is what I meant by physical self. You see, the signal is incomplete: there should be a link that would shoot off into space somewhere and we could theoretically follow it to find the other side, but instead it just folds into itself and disappears. It's all in the numbers here, although I don't suppose you know too much about general relativity."

"No, and frankly I don't care to learn. So then where's it going?"

"Well as far as we have figured out," Shiro weighed in, still flicking blood off the fringes of his needlessly long lab jacket, "The other side is in another dimension... Ryuko, are you okay?"

Ryuko realized she'd been standing there with a stunned, openmouthed look on her face. She quickly threw up her hands in surrender, saying, "This is too fucked up for me to think about right now. I really didn't come here to hear about how I'm some kind of weirdass cosmic entity or whatever the fuck. I just wanted to know if the life fibers inside me would try to kill me or something."

"They won't. They're a part of you, and-,"

"No, that's good enough. Let's get the rest of your tests done and you can tell Satsuki and your other nerd friends and we can go hang out and not think about it."

"Okay, but for the record I think you're extrapolating a bit too much from all this," Shiro said, and he looked a bit hurt by her sudden hostility. The thrill of discovery had been upon both him and Houka, and now they both frowned at the realization that something had upset their friend, although they didn't fully grasp what it was.

"Don't care. So, what's next, you guys want I should drink poison or something?"

"Well, now that you mention it..."

It had been nearly two hours, and Satsuki had now officially bowed out of the conversation. There'd been lots of business to discuss; pertaining not just to the research complex but to the Kiryuin Foundation's business, the Japanese government's diplomacy, and some further cleanup from the war. Even so, it hadn't been enough to fill up the time, so they'd started in on the small talk. But even Tsumugu's recent marriage wasn't enough common ground to keep her in the conversation forever, especially since both Satsuki and him were less than excellent conversationalists. So when Ryuko, Shiro, and Houka returned she was scrolling on her phone while Aikuro and Tsumugu gossiped about some mutual friends.

"Alright," Shiro said as his test subject, now fully clothed and looking pensive and worn out, flopped down on a couch next to Tsumugu, "we've tested Ryuko against physical cuts, abrasions, and blunt force trauma, extreme heat and cold, electric shocks, extended periods of

time without breathing, and various toxins, carcinogens, and drugs including rattlesnake venom, cyanide, asbestos, and alcohol, marijuana, and heroin -,”

“- You gave her heroin?” Satsuki asked loudly.

“Don’t worry, it had no effect on her. In fact, none of the test caused any lasting effects, unless she willed them to. We found that with concentrated effort she could allow her resilience to slow down enough for her to, for example, experience a high, but the moment she decided she’d had enough she could sober up.”

“I’m a little cross-faded right now, actually,” Ryuko said, and Satsuki considered shooting her a disapproving glance but decided against it and kept her eyes trained on Shiro, “It’ll make the next part much easier.”

“Yes, Ryuko isn’t much interested in our results, but I think the rest of you will find them very interesting. Houka, the screen? The screen, Houka.”

“It’s being slow, give me a minute,” Houka replied petulantly, and when it loaded he turned a monitor around to show a bunch of data and displays to the assembled group. Aikuro and Tsumugu leaned in with great interest, and though Satsuki didn’t have much understanding of this sort of science (her PhD was in Sociology) she could tell that the data she was seeing was more typical to astrophysics than human anatomy. “Basically, the results completely support our interdimensional warping hypothesis, and you can eat shit Tsumugu.”

“What? I said I thought it was the most likely to be true.”

“Sure, you *said* that, but what you really thought...” He trailed off with a shrug.

“I’m lost, what’s the hypothesis here?” Satsuki asked.

“Yes, I’ll break it down for you,” Houka came around from behind the desk, carrying a small vial. Within it there drifted a single glowing red thread. A life fiber.

“WHY!” Ryuko shouted, leaping up onto the couch with a pained expression. “WHY did you keep ANY of those things?! I thought they were supposed to have died out when I stopped Ragyo!”

“Ryuko, please calm down. They are quite harmless in this form. We’ve been collecting the excess life fibers left over since the war and storing them down here. The only people who know that we’re keeping them down here are the six of us and the other three former Elites.”

“Destroy them. This is such a ridiculously bad idea – I can’t believe you let them do this Satsuki!”

“Ryuko, Ryuko!” Satsuki said forcefully, then when Ryuko focused on her she turned to a softer tone, “Please sober up.” Still staring at her, Ryuko eventually complied, and Satsuki could see her eyes becoming clearer until she seemed back to normal. “Do you really think I would have approved this if they hadn’t demonstrated there was no risk of the whole thing happening over again?”

“I don’t know, would you have?”

“Well, I didn’t. The life fibers can’t turn humans into energy anymore – it seems to be something that you did when you took control of Shinra Koketsu. Shiro offered his own body to prove it couldn’t be done.”

“Yes, we built a COVER using the blueprints we took from REVOCS data and Shiro entered into it. The scorch marks in test chamber 2 are from it self destructing when it tried to consume him,” Aikuro explained.

“Really. And you went along with this?” Ryuko turned now to Tsumugu.

“I know what you’re thinking, and how I used to feel about the life fibers, but there’s –,”

“Two things, yeah, go on,” She said testily.

“One: the tests were conclusive, nobody is lying or mistaken, they really can’t consume humans anymore and it is because you willed it to happen through Shinra Koketsu. Two: I don’t approve of everything that they’re working on and even less of what they want to do down here, but that’s why it’s important that I keep working here to act as a voice of reason.”

“Alright. Either you’re all insane or you’re right, I’m gonna choose to believe you’re right for the moment. I can always come back and wreck the place later if I change my mind.”

“Please don’t,” Aikuro said lightly, conceding that they actually couldn’t stop her if that’s what she wanted to do. Something in his tone resonated with Ryuko, maybe it reminded her of all their bizarre encounters at his messy Honoujji apartment, but suddenly Ryuko felt much calmer. Yeah, she was in control of this situation no matter what her batshit crazy friends had in store; they’d just spent two hours proving she couldn’t be killed or stopped, hadn’t they?

“Hey man, who knows what I’ll do. I’m an enigma!” He chuckled at her callback to his earlier quip, and then nodded to Houka, who had stood holding the vial as if he didn’t know what to do with it throughout the exchange.

“Okay, Ryuko are we good?” Houka asked, and when she shrugged and nodded slightly he went on, uncapping the vial and using a tweezer to pull the life fiber out. “Satsuki, if would please hold this, you’ll note it has some interesting properties.” Satsuki took it with an outstretched palm, “Try to hold it between two fingers. What do you feel?”

“Nothing,” Satsuki said in bemusement, gently waving the life fiber around between pinched thumb and forefinger, “It must be extraordinarily thin. I was expecting something like a strand of hair.”

“Now try holding it out at arm’s length and slowly bringing it up to your eyes.” Satsuki did, and when she’d brought it to her eyes and it seemed to shrink the only appropriate response was a nonplussed “Huh”.

“It appears to be the same thickness no matter how far away from you it is, doesn’t it?”

“So, am I just seeing the light it emits then?”

“Precisely – pass it over to Ryuko so she can observe the phenomenon, if you’d please – you see, the life fiber is actually infinitely thin, and depending on your measuring tool it can appear to have mass – it has mass on a scale – or not – under a mass spectrometer it produces no reading whatsoever,”

“Whoops.” Ryuko said bluntly, and when Satsuki looked over the life fiber was gone. She brushed the red streak out of her eyes, and it seem to pulsate and glow just a little.

“Uh, what happened?” Houka said, confused now that he’d been broken out of the lecturing flow

“I absorbed it. I swear I didn't mean to, It just got a little too close and magnetted in.”

“That’s fine, we have others. Anyway, what we’ve observed is that life fiber isn’t completely immaterial – it obviously exists – but it doesn’t entirely exist here. Part of it is elsewhere, in a space we can’t observe, which for the sake of convenience we are describing as another dimension, although it doesn’t fully describe what we think the phenomenon is. It's like another axis, maybe two, that branches off from the three we can see, so it both overlaps with the physical space we can see and doesn't. Truthfully, you can't imagine what that would look like. And this is backed up by what we see with Ryuko’s body. When it can, it will regenerate by reattaching its severed parts, but when denied that it will just *recreate* the missing parts seemingly from nothing. What it’s actually doing is pulling the raw material from the other place, or possibly from some other part of our observable universe using the other dimension as an intermediate. Same thing when we introduced poisons and drugs to her system, we thought her biology would be too inhuman to be affected on a basic level, but instead it just removed the hostile particles. And when she held her breath for an extended period of time her body just created oxygen and pumped it directly into her bloodstream. And there’s one other thing. Ryuko, do you recall the time you were shot in the head? It was on the news a few months back.”

“Oh yeah. I was stopping a jewelry store robbery and the robber got nervous. Went right in here and right out here,” She gestured to her temple and the back of her head, “Hurt like a bitch.”

“But you didn’t lose consciousness, did you?”

“I – no I didn’t.”

“Which is strange, isn’t it? That kills normal people instantly, you would think you’d have at least blacked out for a moment. Well, we hypothesize that the flesh-and-blood brain in there isn’t actually your brain: the real one is out there in the other dimension, and what’s in your head is just a connector between it and your body.”

“Woah.” Ryuko mouthed, before a horrifying thought seized her, “WAIT! That would mean Ragyo would be out there somewhere, too, wouldn’t it? If you’re gonna tell me that bitch isn’t dead, and Nui too, then... then... then what the fuck!”

“The idea occurred to us too,” Tsumugu said calmly, putting a hand on her shoulder, “Nui was absorbed by Senketsu when he absorbed Shinra Koketsu, she’s as dead as he is. We have

been looking, but we haven't found any quantum disturbances that would indicate that a being such a Ragyo still existed and was active. We'll keep an eye out, obviously, but it seems for the moment that she really is gone."

"Or it's possible that Senketsu absorbed her too, or at least her life fibers," Shiro weighed in.

"Okay. So, you guys are taking that seriously, at least."

"Very seriously. Ragyo returning in any way could be disastrous even if she cannot activate the Cocoon Sphere."

"Okay then, I guess that's fine."

"However, your brain being immaterial does open up another very interesting possibility: you may be immortal, Ryuko. You only have growth hormones, not the ones associated with ageing, so once those run down in your early 20s the life fibers will probably keep maintaining your body in stasis for, well, forever maybe."

"Alright, cool." Ryuko said, and then after a pause where everyone stared at her in confusion she said, "Uh no, that's not what I meant. I'm just mind-fucked out for today, I'll get back to you on that one."

"Sure, sure. Well then, that's the bulk of what we found, the rest is numbers and stuff you probably don't have interest in. We've just got one thing left for you. Shiro, if you would be so kind."

"Certainly. We're going to go see the project now, so safety gear, everyone."

The storage area turned out to be even larger than the test chambers, and full of all sorts of weird looking stuff that was apparently not what they were looking for. It was at this point that Ryuko started to wonder how deep underground they actually were; there was no way all of this was just in the visitor center's basement. There were rooms filled with broken swords that looked by all indications to be prototypes of Satsuki's old sword Bakuzan, large machines filled with water and blue light that made Ryuko feel sick to look at them (she didn't know a nuclear reactor when she saw one, but she was still glad she was wearing a lead padded lab coat and hardhat when they passed them), dozens of those scanner chambers that they'd cut Ryuko's toe off in, and more bizarre pieces of tech that Ryuko couldn't describe. There was even a large chamber filled with crates of massive, yellowed bones of unfamiliar, monstrous looking creatures.

"Why do you have dinosaur bones down here?" Ryuko asked, and Shiro turned back and glanced at her mysteriously.

"Those aren't dinosaurs," He said, then continued on without further explanation. They finally stopped in front of a broad double door that required both a fingerprint scan and a pin code. A brilliant blue-white light and pale streaks of mist drifted through as it slid noisily open, and all those with normal human eyes squinted into it, rendered momentarily blind.

Ryuko wasn't so affected, but what she saw struck her dumbfounded anyway. Throughout a warehouse just as large if not larger than all the rest stood row after row of vast, cylindrical pods filled with life fibers, slowly swaying like vast, corded rods of kelp in pale cyan fluid.

"This is where we've been keeping all the life fibers. They can still draw upon the electromagnetic pulse of humans and other animals for energy, but we haven't been making any new clothing out of them. So, we keep them alive using this electrically charge solution although they multiply much slower this way."

"And what are you going to do with them?" Ryuko asked, just on the edge of accusation, "Not more Goku Uniforms, I hope."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Shiro said, "Goku uniforms were mere weapons of war, I swore I would never give life to another. Isn't that right?" He said, and his colleagues nodded.

"Then what?"

"Well, more of you, not to put too fine a point on it."

"W-what? Seriously?" She breathed, barely able to register her shock. Satsuki also had a stricken look on her face – this was news to her too, "Oh my god, you are serious, aren't you."

"Now, it's just theoretical, you understand," Aikuro said quickly, raising his hands to placate Ryuko.

"No, you don't have to take the heat for this Aikuro, this is my hill to die on," Shiro said decisively. There was a glint in his eyes that Satsuki had only seen a few times, most notably the first time he'd seen the capabilities of life fibers as an 11-year-old boy genius, "*My god, do you realize what we could do with this stuff?*" He'd grinned, "*If one day we can remove the dangers, render it no longer a threat to humanity... Ohh, it's going to change everything.*" Now, it seemed, his dreams were on the verge of coming to fruition, and Satsuki couldn't help but feel a little nervous, despite having trusted him with her life for the majority of it. "Ryuko, you don't need to eat or drink, you don't need to breath air, you don't need to fear disease, or violence, or maybe even the ravages of time. The world is slowly starving to death, but if we could turn even 10%, even 5% of the population into what you are, imagine what that would do for reducing our needs of food and energy."

"But what about Ragyo? You aren't afraid you'd make another monster like her?"

"Well, what about you? We've studied your father's notes extensively and we found that there's a big difference between how you were fused with the life fibers and how Ragyo was, what they tried to do to Satsuki too. The life fibers must be implanted while the child is still an infant, before it has a well-developed sense of identity. If it is too old, as Satsuki was, there are two possible options: the mind will either embrace the life fibers and become their unquestioning slave like Ragyo, or the mind will reject them, the connection will fail, and the child could possibly die. Now obviously there is a bit of an ethical concern with performing this procedure when the subject is too young to consent to it. I think it's worthwhile even despite that."

“Yeah, you do realize that that still made me have that coma and then a hugeass freakout when my powers awakened, don’t you?” Ryuko snarked loudly, getting very close to Shiro’s face.

“And you’re fine now, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, mostly. I still don’t think I’ve ever gotten all the way used to it though.”

“My hypothesis on that is that if we allowed a child to awaken gradually, it wouldn’t experience the same shock and could avoid the coma and everything else that came with it.”

“You’re fucking insane, you know that?” Ryuko said, still disapproving but now taking a different tact, “I know you won’t stop with just 10% or whatever, you want everybody to be like me one day.” Even Satsuki was now flinching back, listening to them have at it for this long had already made everyone deeply uncomfortable. Shiro wouldn’t back down, and he stared Ryuko in the face, jaw set resolutely.

“Is that so bad? A future where nobody dies, nobody needs to work to stay alive. Some would call it heaven. Is it really so bad to be you, that you would stop anyone from being like you even if it saves humanity from a slow death?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it; don’t twist my words,” Ryuko said at nearly shouting volume, but Shiro was unmoved, and though Ryuko balled her fists up his resolve was beginning to eat at her. She was disturbed by his commitment to this insane scheme, but still she couldn’t believe that was so far down the mad science rabbithole that he wasn’t still the person she knew. They’d made brownies together just weeks ago for goodness’ sake! Seeing how the others were cowering in the face of her anger, and considering that this wasn’t the first time they’d done so today, she began to worry that she was losing control of her temper, “Er, Satsuki, c’mon, what do you think?”

“I don’t think we have enough information to say definitively what will happen. A sample size of three, two of whom are deceased, isn’t much to make predictions on,”

“Er, as a point of technicality,” Houka began, and when everyone glared at him for interrupting the resolution to the argument he cleared his throat and continued quickly, “It’s a sample of two, Nui was in a class of her own, more like a humanoid Kamui than anything else. Still, your point stands.”

“Even more so. In light of that: I sanction this line of research,” Satsuki said in a voice not too different from her old command voice as Ryuko groaned and shook her head, “On the condition that you will not begin any new stage without consulting me first. Ryuko, will you be content if I promise to consult with you when and if they make important strides on this project?”

“I-I guess. Damn, I really thought you’d be on my side.”

“I’m on the side of us getting through the rest of the tour without any more shouting matches.”

“The we’d better hurry on to the next part.”

“After that,” Tsumugu said with a mirthless laugh, “I’m a little worried that the next part might be worse.”

Satsuki knew what it was the moment she set eyes on it. An elegant emerald and gold cocktail dress with a beaded, lacy pattern on the neck and divots in the skirt in the front and back so the legs could move freely, it was a beautiful piece of fashion even if it did look a bit odd pinned up in that display case. But the red slits on the breasts gave it away, to say nothing of its unusual, glossy, chitin-like texture. Those were the eyes of a sleeping dragon. And when they opened...

“Alright,” Ryuko was the first one to speak as she entered into this new room, “I want you guys to know that I’m doing my very best to keep my cool this time. So, what’s the deal with this new Kamui?”

“Kamui Saiban!” Aikuro exclaimed dramatically, turning the face his audience with all the ham of a used car salesman. He had recovered quickly from Ryuko’s antics, probably because he was the most used to having her in his face of all of them except maybe Satsuki. “This is an incomplete prototype Kamui that your father was testing, hoping to use as a counter to Junketsu. It is also, unfortunately, the cause of death of Kinue, Tsumugu’s sister. We recovered it from REVOCS inventory after the war – apparently they’d raided your father’s house not long after you found Kamui Senketsu there.”

“Saiban – Judgement,” Satsuki mused, “It seems our father had quite the flair for naming.”

“Out of curiosity, do you have any record of what he was gonna call Senketsu?” Ryuko asked, “Not to derail us or anything,” She added in a high pitched, snarky tone.

“Actually, we do, especially since Tsumugu and I worked for him when he made it. He called him Nozomi – hope. Although personally I like Senketsu better.”

“Me too, obviously. So, this thing is probably more like Junketsu then, considering that it killed her. He probably hadn’t gotten the whole bonded human-kamui pair down yet.”

“Functionally it is almost identical to Junketsu. Based on Satsuki’s testament, when she first put on Junketsu it attempted to crush her, much like a boa constrictor, and the same thing happened to Kinue. Only difference was that Kinue couldn’t withstand it; Satsuki is in fact the only normal human who has ever effectively worn a pure Kamui that doesn’t have a human’s genome incorporated into its micro-weave pattern, and she managed it through sheer force of will alone.”

“While that’s flattering, I can assure you I have no intention of replicating the feat,” Satsuki said.

“And we have no intention of asking you – or anyone else – to wear this Kamui. At least not in its current form. With what we have of it, we believe we can remake it into a bonded

Kamui like Senketsu: Sentient, capable of communicating telepathically with its bonded wearer and with other nearby people, and capable of absorbing life fibers to become more powerful; not to mention all the other powers a Kamui provides and without the danger of it trying to kill or mind control its wearer.”

“So we’re making new sentient lifeforms now,” Ryuko said with a sigh.

“Uhh, do you disapprove, or...”

“Honestly? Not as much as everything else.” She crossed her arms and rubbed her arms thoughtfully, “Meeting Senketsu was... the best thing that ever happened to me, no other way to put it. You can’t know what it’s like to have a Kamui until you’ve experienced it. So, if you can get this to work, I say go for it, other people should get the experience too. Count me out of wearing it though; no way I’m letting Senketsu get replaced.”

“That’s completely understandable, thank you Ryuko,” Aikuro said solemnly, then cracked a smug smile, “Looks like I get off easy today, boys.” His colleagues frowned or chuckled frustratedly, “Anyway, we still need someone to be Saiban’s wearer. Satsuki? Any interest?”

“I’m sorry Aikuro, but I’m afraid not. I promised myself I would never take another life, and in a Kamui, well, I suppose being able to do so that easily I’d eventually be put into a dangerous situation where that was the best option.”

“I see. Well, then we go to our next best.”

“Nonon?” Satsuki asked, anticipating who he would pick.

“Well, yes. As one of the elites she has experience with Goku Uniform transformation process, which is not terribly different from the life fiber synchronization process. Her combat prowess is probably third only to Uzu’s and your own, Satsuki, and she’s already physically fit enough to resist the strain of wearing a Kamui. And, of course, she’s female unlike the other elites; it should be possible to make a male compatible Kamui but Saiban is definitely not. Do you think she’d agree?”

“She might, if I approached her in the right way.”

“Quick question,” Ryuko said, “Why do we have to use this Kamui? If you guys have all the blueprints, why don’t you just make a new one that you can know for sure will work?”

“That’s my complaint too,” Tsumugu said, “My position has always been that we should reverse engineer Saiban and use what we know to make a better bonded Kamui.”

“And I keep telling you that while that would be better it will take at least a year until we can get that working, and we could use a Kamui much sooner than that,” Shiro said.

“Now why’s that?” Ryuko asked, and all four scientists looked at Satsuki bemusedly.

“You mean you haven’t told her?” Houka asked, and now Ryuko looked at Satsuki accusingly too.

“Satsuki, what is it?”

“Well, I’m afraid I haven’t been entirely up front with you Ryuko. I’ve been sparing you from an unpleasant truth up until now. You once asked why I needed security guards now that our story broke and I’m one of the most well-regarded people on the planet, but the truth is that there’s a few people who definitely do not love me. Powerful people.”

“Oh shit.”

“Indeed. You may be aware that lately there have been quite a number of terrorist attacks across Japan, especially in Tokyo. The press has been reporting that they were perpetrated mostly by lone lunatics; we know better, but they’ve covered their tracks very well. You see, Ragyo managed to dupe a large number of her employees at REVOCS into believing that the Cocoon Sphere Genesis was some sort of apotheosis for the human race, a bridge to heaven. Even now quite a lot of them still believe it, and they hate all of us with a passion. It’s become some sort of doomsday cult, and while we’re doing our best to track them down they’re pretty good at their game. What’s worse, they have copies of the REVOCS database and they have life fibers; they will be making Goku Uniforms, maybe even Kamuis if they can figure out how, and they will be coming for us.”

“Wow, alright, point taken,” Ryuko was staring at the floor pensively, a shadow over her face. *What could she be thinking? I hope she isn’t angry at me for hiding this.* “And I bet the other countries that you said didn’t like you much will be a problem too.”

“They will, especially America, England, and Russia. They already have Dotonbor- sorry, DTR based mecha in production; a significant markup over conventional military forces, and we’re operating under the assumption that it’s only a matter of time before the REVOCS cultists sell them some life fibers and they have Goku Uniforms. We need to be prepared in case they decide they’ve had enough of the way things are run now.”

“Wow. This really sucks, but for once I think I see where you’re coming from. I only hope Nonon turns out to be the right troll-doll for the job.”

“Ryuko I know you and she don’t get along, but do you have to refer to her like that? Especially at such a serious time.”

“Until she changes that ridiculous dye job, she’s the troll-doll.”

“Wait, hold on, you do know that’s natural, right? She suffers from a very rare pigment disorder similar to albinism.”

“WHAT? Satsuki that’s absurd, quit making shit up.”

“No, it’s true – I’ve known her since we were toddlers and she’s always had hair that same color!” Shiro came to Satsuki’s defense, smiling now. *Oh, they’re definitely fucking with me now. Punishment for acting like a jerk earlier.*

“Guys come on. Houka? They’re trying to trick me, aren’t they?”

“Why would they make up something that specific?”

“Oh for the love of – Aikuro?”

“I’m pretty sure they’re telling the truth, Ryuko,” He said with a laugh, by this point they were all laughing, Ryuko wasn’t sure if it was at her or with her, but it still felt good nonetheless to see them smile after so many heavy revelations. Especially Satsuki, who was laughing so softly that on anyone else it would’ve hardly been noticeable, but was still laughing.

“Tsumugu? C’mon someone please be real with me here!”

“There’s two things you need to know,” Tsumugu said with an entirely straight face and crossed arms.

“Okay, good,” Ryuko said eagerly, motioning him to continue.

“One: I have no idea if they’re lying or not.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Two: You definitely shouldn’t ask Nonon about this,” He finished, finally cracking up just as Ryuko gave up and joined him.

Back in the car, pulling out of the roundabout to leave the research complex, Satsuki couldn’t help but notice that Ryuko was deep in thought. It had been a long time saying goodbyes, Ryuko had insisted on apologizing to everyone for getting mad, then got mad again when Houka asked her if she would come back for more tests, then she had to apologize again. Despite all that, Shiro had texted Satsuki as they were leaving, saying **Nothing important got broken, so I think we can chalk that one up as a win**, and though part of Satsuki was upset at him for still treating Ryuko like a wild animal sometimes, she had to admit that they’d dropped a lot on her little sister’s head all at once and she’d done a decent job handling it all. Or had she? Satsuki couldn’t parse what was going on in those eyes as they stared with a dull glimmer at the passing scenery.

They were about half of the way back to the Mankanshoku’s when a good idea struck Satsuki. Some quick texted instructions to the chauffer and they were pulling off the highway, which made Ryuko sit up.

“We taking a different way home?”

“You’ll see.”

“Okay,” Ryuko muttered sullenly, and soon enough they were pulling up in front of a small bakery on the edge of a park. With antique glass paneling and a narrow but comfy area of outdoor seating confined by wrought iron fences with flower baskets along the edges, it was about the most welcoming looking place Satsuki knew. She’d discovered it with Nonon a few months back, it was quite close to Nonon’s apartment in fact, but when Satsuki told

Ryuko this for small talk while they waited on line she wasn't especially impressed. In fact, she stayed fairly quiet and lost in thought until they were seated with their pastries and hot chocolate at one of the little tables outside, where she suddenly let out a groan of frustration.

"I *really* want to talk about it," She said, propping her head on her hand as she watched Satsuki polish off the last of her cinnamon roll (Ryuko had gotten just one miniature cupcake, so she was long since finished with it), "I'm not gonna, but you know."

"I do know. It's hard at first, but you'll either get practice or someone will reveal everything you couldn't talk about and then you won't have to worry." Ryuko made a noncommittal grunt, then stayed quiet for a moment longer before opening her mouth again.

"It's just, it's never going to end, is it?" Ryuko said, and Satsuki didn't need any further explanation to know what she meant.

"No, I don't suppose it will. Not for as long as we live," Satsuki responded in a tone as slow and subdued as Ryuko's.

"So, forever, apparently."

"I – um, I don't know. Not for a long time, either way."

"I'm gonna get dragged into it," Ryuko said after another long pause.

"You don't have to, you know. We've gone to great lengths to make sure nobody knows your whereabouts who shouldn't."

"Yeah, but I'm gonna get dragged in anyway. Not soon, I hope, but eventually."

"If you ever feel you don't have a choice in the matter, don't hesitate to tell me."

"No, it's alright. Actually, I wanted to say I don't blame you, or any of the others for it. When whatever happens happens I'll want to help, I'm sure of it. Y'know, I actually really appreciate how up-front you guys were with everything."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I suppose you're welcome."

"It's nice to know what's going on for a change. Last time I didn't know what the fuck was happening half the time," she said with a quiet chuckle, "And when I did it really pissed me off. It's just a lot to think about now."

Satsuki couldn't help but agree, but she interpreted that so differently than Ryuko did. She reflected that she probably seemed lost in thought as well, because her mind was racing with all the different possibilities the day had opened up for the future. Could she persuade Nonon to take up Kamui Saiban? What would Saiban be like? Would they even get it to work? Would it be enough to defeat their enemies? She couldn't even begin to guess. *Once again we're saying the same thing, but we're on completely different pages. You're right Ryuko, the madness of our lives is never going to end. But you know what? I don't think I'd know what to do with myself if it did.*

Chapter End Notes

Where did Ryuko calling Nonon a troll doll originate? I think it it was another fanfic, so I suppose I'm stealing it. Sorry! It's great though!

Update (10/15/18): I am about halfway done with the next chapter (a series of short fluff-with-some-plot-and-some-smut vignettes) and am about to enter into what may be the busiest week of my year. I will endeavor to finish it this week but know that if it doesn't arrive for a little I'm just a little behind and normal schedule will resume shortly.

Peaceful Days in Kanagawa

Chapter Summary

A nice long chunk of vignettes that show the passage of time through the end of Ryuko's high school years. Features include:

1. Mataro gets serious
2. Christmas festivities
3. Mako calms Ryuko down yet again
4. Satsuki's speech is interrupted
5. Ryuko goes on a weird fishing trip with the guys
6. A walk in the woods

Chapter Notes

This one contains a short, not particularly raunchy sex scene. I have plans for more similar bits, and I'll probably drop a little warning up here like this whenever it's fitting.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

~ November ~

Sometimes, even when everyone agrees that society needs to change, even when everyone agrees how it needs to change, change is slow to arrive. The students at Rinne High still marched the parade grounds in carefully drilled lines every morning before classes, even months after any reason to do so had been eliminated. They would not be sent out to patrol the city streets and maintain order – there was now a government police force for that. There would be no Takarada school coming for a raid trip – the country was unified again. Most importantly, there were no more Rinne-Do Enforcers, the elite guard of Rinne Alumni who had stuck around to terrorize the student body – Those meatheads now mostly found employment in the police force and national military. But they were still out there, rifles on shoulders, come rain or snow or baking heat, hating every minute of it.

Mataro probably hated drill even more than most. He knew he was destined to be more than another meathead; they were in plentiful supply these days. He couldn't stand the monotony, especially not how similar everyone looked with their hair pulled back under their caps and their uniforms buttoned and in order. Too often he'd tried to chat with a friend during drill only to find he'd accidentally stood next to a complete stranger instead. It didn't even have

the saving grace of being a good warm-up for track. Locking your legs for so long just made them stiff and sore.

Ryuko never marched during drill, of course. There she was now, Mataro could barely spot her reclining across the school's front stairs even though their smooth stone must have been freezing this time of year. She had tried to, gussied up her uniform and stood in rank and file with all the rest on their first day of school, only to have the principal pull her aside and tell her that, well, they just *couldn't* have Lady Ryuko Matoi doing something so common and low as that. Mataro got why she'd been disappointed; she wanted to live a normal life her way and considering that was part of normal high school experience she wanted to experience it too. Usually he was as grateful as could be that she'd chosen that path, especially when she could just as easily have gone off with Satsuki to lead the life of a princess if she'd wanted. But every so often she really ought to own it a little more, say to folks: *"Yeah, I'm Ryuko fucking Matoi, I sword-fought monsters and dictators and an evil goddess while wearing nothing but a living bikini, what have you done lately? Oh yeah, and I also saved the world, so maybe I don't have to march in drill if I don't feel like it."*

Classes were boring as usual, Mataro sat at the back with his friends throughout the morning. Slouching and swaggering his way through classes had come naturally to him, despite having never gone to an actual school before Rinne. He'd gotten so good at it, in fact, that boys twice his size (which was most of them, even though he'd finally started to shoot up) avoided him, especially since he'd gotten a reputation for acting on his threats, even with his friends. The teachers were still adjusting to life without the enforcers, many were still too meek to say anything while Mataro's little crew hung about with rumpled, unbuttoned uniforms, muttering amongst themselves. A few were of a different breed, drill sergeants who weren't afraid to take the rules into their own hands. Mataro could respect that, they reminded him off Ira Gamagoori a little bit and though the guy was a pain in the ass at the best of times, he got results. But they weren't common; for the most part Mataro was content to slack off and play the role of leader for his crew. His leadership in that little group came naturally, too, once he'd established his reputation other freshmen were happy to let him boss them around. They didn't need to know how much work he put in after hours to keep his grades up, and they wouldn't like it much if they found out.

On this particular day when lunch rolled around Mataro was distracted and in a bit of an irritable mood. Plentiful thoughts were keeping him busy – to be fair, most were video games or other such inanities – but he did have something more practical too. Today was the semifinal for Track and Field, squeezed in just before it got too cold for outdoor events. Mataro was the clutch runner for both hurdles and sprints, his scores would be essential for ensuring the school made it to finals. And it was a home game, so the family would be coming to cheer him on. Including Ryuko. So he had to be on his A game. It wasn't really related, but all that made him particularly incensed when, as he approached his crew's table in the mess hall, he saw one of them pull a none-too-small plastic bag of weed out of his backpack like he was the slickest thing on Earth.

"What the fuck's this, Kinzo?!" Mataro shouted as he gave him a nasty whack right above the ear. Kinzo immediately dropped the bag, and Mataro's lightning quick hands snatched it while everyone was still letting out dismayed "Woahhh"s in reaction.

“Owww, what the hell Mataro!” Kinzo whined, but he kept his hands to himself as Mataro held the weed up accusingly. Kinzo was a bulky kid with a great deal of muscle for a freshman – When they played ball after school his secret weapon was the good-old-fashioned shove - but in the face of Mataro’s jabs he might as well have been a sandbag. Mataro had learned in Honou-town never to hesitate when striking, something his classmates hadn’t figured out yet, and it gave him an insurmountable edge despite his scrawny physique.

“You can’t wait three fucking hours? You’re gonna get us all in trouble moron!”

“Dude chill, teachers don’t give a shit,” One of the others chimed in, hands raised to placate Mataro.

“Mr. Neiji for sure does, and he’s on lunch duty today,” Mataro returned, pointing out one of the drill- sergeant-types teachers standing with crossed arms at the main doors, “You all blind too, huh?”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, come on guys. I don’t need a detention today,” He tossed the bag back with another fierce slap, “I’m going to get lunch. That better be gone before I get back.”

As Mataro stalked off, he couldn’t help but cackle to himself. Opening and closing a plastic bag without making a sound was his latest masterwork of the pickpocket craft. Honoujji hadn’t even been able to teach him that one, he’d just picked it up to sneak cookies without Sukoyo catching him. Kinzo would wind up thinking he’d just forgotten how much weed he’d had, it had only been out of his sight for a split second. *Still got it*, Mataro thought with avaricious pride as he unfurled the overflowing handful of the pale green buds he’d snatched, *fitting punishment for being so careless*. Suddenly a hand dropped heavily onto Mataro’s shoulder, and his heart leapt to his throat as he realized he’d been being just as careless. He turned slowly, expecting to see Mr Neiji glowering over him, but instead he was greeted by a toothy grin and shining sapphire eyes with gear-shaped pupils.

“Smooth moves back there, bro.”

“Oh thank God it’s just you!” Mataro grinned with relief, “You coulda said something, you know.”

“What, and undermine your authority? Nah, you take care of your crew’s business on your own, isn’t that right?” She turned to a friend she’d been walking along with, a handsome senior with swept back hair and a permanent, winning smile fixed across his face. Before she’d arrived, he’d been the darling of the entire school, a star student who lead of group of upperclassmen known for effectively navigating the worlds of both the honors students and delinquents. Now he played second fiddle, but second fiddle to Ryuko Matoi was still an accomplishment. He nodded and replied, “Sure is.”

“Nah that’s nothing, he’s just an idiot,” Mataro jerked a thumb back at his lunch table. A couple of his friends noticed and tried their best not to look panicked at the thought of drawing her attention

“Well, you keep ‘em in line then. Alright, I’m off, Mako wants to eat outside,” She started to walk away, “But first, the big sister tax.”

“Aw what? C’mon, I swiped this fair and square!” Mataro protested. In theory Ryuko could have made the same demand of any of this school’s delinquent population – she commanded their respect one and all – but she only ever borrowed from Mataro.

“So did I. Later!”

“Wha-,” Mataro unclasped his hand in surprise, but it was already too late. Half his score was already gone. When had she even taken it? “Aghhh, you and your reflexes! I thought Mako didn’t want you getting high anymore!”

“Oh, so now you’re an expert on what Mako thinks, huh?” Ryuko rejoined playfully, “And I thought you had a track meet to stay focused for!”

“Well I wasn’t gonna – argh!” Mataro groaned as Ryuko slid off into the mess hall crowds. She always got in the last word.

The air hadn’t warmed much by the time the track meet rolled around. This was a disadvantage for most scrawny guys– they felt the effects of the chill faster – but Mataro had found an effective workaround in remaining in constant motion. He jogged in place between events, tossed a tennis ball around with some other teammates waiting on the bench for their events, and jogged back and forth from the spot on the bleachers where his family was seated. The stadium was no Honoujji Arena, the bleachers were low and cozy, so with them in the front seats it was easy to talk back and forth. Barazo and Sukoyo were, of course, very interested in the goings on of the team (especially considering that it was much more wholesome than their son’s traditional pastimes), but Ryuko and Mako didn’t seem to be paying much attention.

They’d brought along a few friends, upperclassmen who made up their little clique. Before Ryuko and Mako arrived they probably never spoke to each other; among their number were the school darling Ryuko had been walking with at lunch, two dedicated delinquents – massive meatheads with crude senses of humor, a gorgeous glossy-haired girl whose claim to fame was her starring role in the school musical, and a willowy artist who’d had the courage to ask Ryuko if she could paint her portrait on Ryuko’s first day at Rinne. Still, chatting with heads huddled together, Ryuko and Mako dead in the center with hands about each other’s waists, they looked so cohesive and close that they could’ve been best friends all their lives. Mataro had to admit he was a little disappointed that Ryuko and her crew didn’t want to talk – Mako did wave excitedly when he came over but that was it.

Eventually Mataro’s first event, hurdles, was up. This one wasn’t such a big deal; a light build was a massive advantage here and looking across the lineup from the other schools he was the scrawniest of them by a long shot. Besides, compared to the shifting rooftops of the Honou-town shanties this was an easy playing field. It did take him a minute to get his hair situated though; he’d taken to braiding it rather than getting it cut, but that meant he had to tie it up to the back of his head and not only was there still a risk of it falling

but if he didn't do it right it looked pretty silly. At the starting block, he did his best to focus in as the noise of the audience started building in anticipation.

"Let's go Mataro!" Ryuko's voice suddenly rang out, accompanied by a shrill whistle from Mako. The starting bell rang out, but about half of the other contestants were so shocked that *the* Ryuko Matoi was in the audience they tripped right out of the gate, rubbing faces to the rubbery red track. Mataro only got a few steps in before the coach blew a piping whistle and called them all to a halt. As they went back to the starting block to try again, Mataro faintly heard his sisters talking.

"Oh no, Ryuko look what happened!" Mako yelled plaintively, leaning on the railing

"Ah man. Sorry!" Ryuko said as she came up to join her, her entourage following close behind. This time, he smiled as he took his mark. There was no way he was losing to these buffoons, not if they couldn't handle Ryuko's mere presence. That alone put him on a whole other level. She was rooting for him to win, so he would. That's what it meant to be the little brother of The Girl Who Saved the World.

~ December ~

Christmas had always been a big deal in the Mankanshoku household, even when they'd been so dirt poor that they were lucky to have a single present for each of the kids. That sort of thing didn't matter, it was more about the spirit of the thing – and the time off of work and school, and all the food, of course. But now that the Kiryuin fortune was providing them with a cushy middle-class lifestyle they could afford to go all out. Mataro's 1st place and best overall competitor trophies from the track championships lost their proud spot on the mantelpiece to a resplendent wreath loaded with golden tassels and shiny red ornaments. Buying a real tree was out of the question – it was much too warm in Japan to grow enough for anybody but the rich these days – but a large fake that nearly passed for a living plant would do just as well. When Ryuko'd first brought it in (through the balcony, since it wouldn't fit in the elevator) they'd had to teach Guts to stop peeing on it, but once they'd solved that problem it glittered with a disorganized mess of ornaments.

The food too would be a cut above their standard, especially for the main event on Christmas Eve. Sukoyo had started an entire week in advance, and quickly recruited the rest of the family to help prepare enough croquettes, cookies, roast ham, and other homey delicacies to satisfy even the Mankanshoku's legendary appetites. And they would need them too, because it wasn't just the five of them; quite a lot of the extended family were due to arrive. How they were all going to fit into the apartment hadn't been figured out even as the grandparents began arriving, then aunts, uncles, and cousins; somehow it all worked out in the end, but they were down to standing room only by the time Satsuki arrived.

A hush fell upon the apartment as she struggled to work a tall stack of elegantly wrapped boxes through a door that couldn't be opened fully because there was someone in the way. A

sea of chestnut-haired faces with big, bold eyes were suddenly turned to her. With all all the happy chatter dying down, she couldn't help but blush awkwardly. Everybody had been told she would be coming, of course, but hearing that and seeing the most powerful woman in Japan shuffling through the door with a nervous smile were entirely different things. Ryuko quickly rushed over to grab the gifts, dispelling the tension with a loud, affectionate greeting that was quickly followed by one from Mako. Soon enough her gifts were piled up on the stack by the tree, and some semblance of normal holiday cheer had resumed, although Satsuki could swear they were still glancing at her nervously.

The family party turned out quite well. Until recently most of the extended Mankanshoku family was too poor to travel, so there were many tearful reunions. Barazo probably spent the entire evening blubbering at the kitchen table with a younger version of himself – a brother he hadn't seen in years. Mako tried to introduce Ryuko and Satsuki to everyone, and they turned out to be just as cheery and welcoming as the Mankanshoku's they already knew, despite being both thrilled and terrified to be meeting such celebrities. The food was a big hit too; Mako had been in charge of the hors d'oeuvres and they were all but gone by the time Satsuki arrived. When the first course was ready everyone crowded into the kitchen until there really was no room to move. Even so, Ryuko and Satsuki spent plenty of time leaning against the wall, not knowing how to involve themselves with a family they'd just met.

“Hey, what time were you planning to split over to Nonon's?” Ryuko asked after the second course. Normally she would've loathed going to the high-class rager going on at the Jakuzure Penthouse tonight, but frankly she was about done with the Mankanshokus and oddly looking forward to a group she could make uncomfortable intentionally. It wasn't that the Mankanshokus were ignoring her and Satsuki, more like they were avoiding them out of deference. Nonon's friends, scions of the lesser Japanese dynasties, wouldn't be so shy, in fact they were quite looking forward to meeting Ryuko apparently. They didn't know what they were in for.

“I was hoping to give you my presents, but I would feel odd in front of all the guests, I don't have anything for them.”

“Oh, well we were going to open ours tomorrow morning...”

“I didn't know that!” Satsuki said, suddenly looking a little worried, “The thing is, one of my presents really ought to be opened tonight.”

“I see,” Ryuko said, and when she looked over to the present stack she could indeed see why. Why else would Sukoyo's box have air holes? “Alright, fair enough, I'll get everyone together on the balcony. After that we can leave whenever ya want.”

“You two weren't too tough to pick for, but I hope you like them anyway,” Satsuki said as she handed large boxes to Barazo and Mataro. A huge DSLR camera and a new VR console, both things the boys had been gushing about for months. They were thrilled – not

the most thoughtful gifts, but that hardly mattered. She earned lung crushing hugs for those gifts.

“And for Mako, well, I’ve gotten you enough clothes and jewelry, so I hope you like this,” She slid over an envelope, which Mako opened with a confused “Huh?” Inside there was nothing but a small sheet of brightly colored card-stock, “It’s a subscription to a catering service. Just go online and you can order whatever you want from some excellent chefs, and they’ll deliver it right to you, free of charge. I’ll keep paying for it as long as you want.”

“No. Way. They have these?”

“Only for the super-rich. Trust me, even Nonon would be jealous of this.”

“Cooooool,” She giggled, and was already on the caterer’s website, browsing the menu. It just kept going and going. Satsuki, meanwhile, was handing over Sukoyo’s gift.

“Now, I know you always say you don’t want anything -,”

“- That’s right! I hope you didn’t spend terribly much,” Sukoyo chirped as she set to work unwrapping.

“Well, I don’t think you’ll be turning down her,” Satsuki said, and her hunch was confirmed as Sukoyo squealed in delight, lifting aloft a tiny grey kitten. It mewled and snuffled, staring up at Sukoyo with bright blue eyes like beads. The balcony rang with the entire family’s fascinated coos.

“Aww, lookit you!” Sukoyo cradled her new kitten on her lap, where it yawned and nestled in sleepily, “She’s wonderful. Oh, I wonder what name will do for her? Thank you dear, I already love her.”

“You’re very welcome. I’ll have someone deliver her food and other supplies tomorrow. And last but not least, Ryuko,” Satsuki hurled a tiny box at Ryuko with little fanfare, which she snatched from the air and unwrapped it in a flash. An ignition key.

“So uh, this goes to something, right?”

“You’ve already seen it,” Satsuki said, shifting her head out towards the street. A devilish grin broke out on Ryuko’s face. When they’d first come out onto the balcony she’d spotted it down on the curb. *Damn that’s a cool bike, wonder whose it is*, she’d thought. Apparently, it was hers. With a noisy whoop she was over the balcony railing and down on the ground, admiring its shiny red and black paint and smooth, waspy frame. She’d ridden a fair few motorcycles in her life, but never one so streamlined and fearsome looking. It was perfect.

“Holy shit Satsuki, this is an antique!” She shouted, beaming, and Satsuki responded in kind. Ryuko could swear she’d seen teeth, for just the slightest moment.

“Indeed it is!” She yelled back, “I had it converted to electric though, so don’t worry about not having anywhere to fill it up!”

“Wow... How fast does she go?”

“I have no idea. Fast. I’m sure you’ll find out!” Satsuki said, then added, “Oh, and there’s a helmet in the side-bag for Mako!”

“It has side-bags? Oh shit it does!” It was so sleek and artfully designed that Ryuko had actually not noticed, “Wow, this thing rules.” The helmet turned out to a pretty pastel pink and white thing, perfect for Mako. Ryuko leapt the seven stories back to the balcony to show her, practically shaking with excitement.

“Ooh, pretty. Oh, but don’t you want one, Ryuko?”

“I sure don’t need one. Bike’ll break long before I do.”

“Yeah, but you’d look *really* cool in one.”

“True, true, but I like to feel the wind in my hair. Well Satsuki, you’re gonna make a tough act to follow, I can tell you that. Makes my present look like a joke, but we’ll leave that ‘til morning, eh?”

“So, you like it?”

“Don’t play dumb Satsuki,” Ryuko laughed, hugging her, “I love it. Now c’mon, let’s get over to Nonon’s. If you thought Mako and I were coming with in your limo though, you got another thing coming!”

“Okay, what the hell. Didn’t you tell her to wear something nice? She looks worse than normal!” Nonon fumed as Satsuki led the way into her penthouse apartment. The music was blaring, one of Nonon’s own compositions, and so they didn’t make quite the entrance that Satsuki had at the Mankanshoku’s. Some of the nearby guests, well dressed young socialites with the faraway look of being totally plastered, did seem to have noticed them though, and they were gabbing and pointing. Satsuki was a little glad she couldn’t hear them over the music.

“Hello to you too,” Ryuko snarked as she passed by, “Here’s a coat for ya, miss hostess.” Nonon stumbled momentarily under the momentum of Ryuko’s winter jacket as Mako slipped past her with a shouted greeting and a kiss on the cheek. “And for the record I didn’t mean for my hair to be this messy, but then I drove here *on my new motorcycle*,” Ryuko said proudly as Mako began fussing with her hair. They eventually settled on a spiked up style that showed off all that lovely red underneath.

“Hang up your own damn coat, you barbarian! I – Oh god, you brought *him* too?” Nonon was distracted from her ravings when Mataro suddenly slid in through the front door.

“He can be surprisingly persistent,” Satsuki said. In truth she found it hard to say no, especially since his parents weren’t particularly concerned about it, “Don’t worry, he won’t be going anywhere near the alcohol, isn’t that right?”

“Wassup baby, missed me?” Mataro was busy quipping to Nonon, following Ryuko’s lead in agitating her. “Oh, yeah yeah whatever,” He moped when he heard Satsuki, then set off hot on Ryuko’s heels. Of all of them he was for some reason the only one who’d decided to dress for the occasion, with a thin grey suit and a striped vest that made him look even thinner. He still hadn’t gotten neckties quite right though, his was more than a little lopsided.

“Geez, those strays better not make me lose control of my own party,” Nonon muttered to Satsuki after the others had gone. She did look frazzled, Satsuki had to admit, but on the other hand also oddly energized. *If it can be a performance art, Nonon will find a way to enjoy it. Nothing to worry about here, she’s got this despite her complaining.* And indeed she did, darting off a moment after to shift the flow of one little groups conversation, then refill the glasses of another, then off to check on the group hiding in the steam of the heated pool on the patio.

The socialite guests at Nonon’s bash were absolutely thrilled to see Ryuko, approaching her in such droves that she quickly ran out of witty retorts to their dumb questions. She hadn’t expected to feel so under siege by their hands, but after the fiftieth or so selfie she’d taken to nestling on a couch with Mako, hands firmly around each other just to show they were taken. Things dramatically improved, though, when seemingly out of nowhere Ira’s massive bulk dropped onto the couch next to them, followed by Houka and Shiro on the other side. The gang was almost entirely reassembled (Uzu was still overseas, a shame because he could always be counted on as the life of the party, although when he was mentioned Nonon said he wouldn’t have been invited anyway), and they whiled away the evening almost unaware of the other guests. When the time for drinking games came around Ryuko wiped the floor with everyone using her power to make herself sober repeatedly, but not before overdoing it an almost puking twice. *Long time since I felt that pain, can’t say I missed it,* she thought.

Mataro looked a little bored and out of place at first, especially since in his suit with his hair cleaned up he could pass for an oddly short 18 year-old and he was critically terrible at responding to drunk women and even one or two drunk men hitting on him. Satsuki realized then that she hadn’t really noticed him growing older, but Ryuko came to a much more practical realization first.

“Mataro! You bored?”

“Well, no, not that much,” He said, not wanting to look like a wallflower in front of her.

“You know how to cheat at blackjack, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“They’re playing over there, you know,” Ryuko gestured over to a card table on the other side of the main room, “Have at ‘em!” He was gone before Nonon could protest.

“How does he know how to count cards?” Satsuki asked innocently.

“Honou-town rules baby!” Mako shouted, her face flushed just from the fun of it all since she didn’t drink on principle, “It’s not cheating if you don’t get caught!”

It must have been nearly five A.M. when things finally began to wind down. In that time a great many events had transpired. They’d been joined by a couple socialite friends of Nonon’s who she vouched “weren’t total asses”, Houka and Shiro had retired to a guest bedroom - or rather been carried to it fast asleep, and Mataro had racked up such a ludicrous pile of chips he couldn’t possibly carry it all. When the dealer had looked over to Nonon for guidance, Satsuki and Ryuko had instead shot him a look that clearly said “let my little brother play cards, or else”. By far the most interesting thing that happened by Satsuki’s recollection was when Nonon had seen off a suitor with a particularly scathing remark (something along the lines of “please, I’ve seen better looking apes at the zoo. And smarter too.”) and Ryuko had burst out laughing. She would never have been so callous if she’d been sober, but it was a difference of degree, especially if she were in an irritable mood. *They’re so much alike sometimes. No wonder they can’t stand each other.* In the end, though they were all thoroughly exhausted, the sun was rising and it would soon be time to return to the wholesome confines of the Makanshoku apartment for present opening. This time, Ryuko didn’t protest when Satsuki suggested putting her bike in the Limo’s trunk.

Nobody said anything on the ride home. In fact, they were all asleep. When Ryuko woke up she’d kick herself – she’d been trying to figure out if surviving without sleep was one of her powers. Evidently not.

~ January ~

The faint buzz of Ryuko’s phone slowly roused her to waking, despite her body’s protests to let it drift back to sleep. She rolled over, and the beady glass eye of a stuffed fox pressed up uncomfortably into her cheek. Mako loved to pile their bed high with stuffed animals and extra pillows – it wasn’t that she was particularly attached to any of them - she just nested like a rabbit lining its burrow. Ryuko didn’t quite get it, besides, she had something much better. Mako’s arm was draped over Ryuko’s shoulder, she lifted it as she sat up on the side of the bed and sat for a moment staring at her. Yeah, Mako was way better than a stuffed animal; Ryuko badly wanted to lay back down up against her rather than venture out into the howling winter wind.

Pressed up against her, completely suffused in her, Ryuko’s unnaturally keen senses went wild. She could feel everything: The tiny peach-fuzz hairs on her arms, the prodding places where her bones lay, the slow sloshing of her blood, the endless grinding of her internal organs. What a delicate, precious thing it was, this soft, squishy bag that held everything that was Mako. She’d never shared that observation with her, but she had a feeling that Mako understood it on some level and embraced it. How else could every little thing about living as that creature fill her with such joy? But Ryuko couldn’t dwell on those thoughts too long; seeing Mako that way, as just an animal, just a body, tore open a void in her chest. It was a

constant reminder that she wasn't human, that her bag of flesh was artificial, a puppet for her real self. Which was... what? She'd seen enough science fiction to know that things in another dimension were for sure incomprehensibly different, not pleasant for humans. Monstrous. Horrific. She traced a gentle line along Mako's cheek, feeling it's subtle rise and fall with her breath and burning with jealousy not only that she would never have to worry about these things, but also that she got to stay nested in bed while Ryuko dragged herself along for another night's patrol. *Fuck her for looking so cute, too.*

"Muhhh," Mako made a soft mewling noise, evidently not as deep asleep as she'd expected, "going out, Ryuko?"

"Yup," Ryuko sighed resignedly, "See you in the morning."

"Ryuko what's the matter?" Mako asked, taking Ryuko off guard. She didn't think she'd been so obviously lost in thought, but then Mako was known to be perceptive about these things when she wanted to be.

"Oh nothing. Go back to sleep."

"Aw c'mon Ryuko," Mako was sitting up now, rocking Ryuko with both hands wrapped around her elbow, "You can tell me! You can tell me anything."

"It's alright, really. Let me go, please. The city needs me," She went to gently pry Mako's hands away, but before she could Mako doubled down, throwing her arms around Ryuko's shoulders in a vice grip.

"No Ryuko! Tell me!" She exclaimed petulantly, "You can't go down there and save people and the first thing they see is you pouting like that! What will they think, you're sad that they're okay? Tell me what's wrong, ok? Is it Lady Satsuki again?"

"What? No, of course not," Ryuko had made the mistake of telling Mako that she had been briefly (yeah, definitely briefly) infatuated with Satsuki in the final days of the war, and her hyperactive imagination had been depicting her pining after Satsuki and formulating contrived scenarios involving the two of them ever since. Frankly, it was surreal to hear her girlfriend and adopted sister fantasize about her paired up with another woman, who also happened to be her biological sister, but then that was Mako for you, in situations like these she'd decided the labels hardly mattered, "Come on Mako."

"Nuh-uh!" Mako rolled back onto the bed, dragging Ryuko with her. Superstrength aside, she might as well have been a ragdoll in Mako's arms, and once she was down her back seemed to relax and sag and she could barely imagine how she could've managed to sit up just a moment ago. Mako buried her face in the crook of Ryuko's neck, pressing her lips gently against the corded skin of her windpipe and continuing, "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what's the matter."

"I – Oh hell alright," Ryuko said, lifting an arm up to cradle Mako's head practically involuntarily. "You remember when I went to see Houka and Shiro's lab? Well, they told me some really crazy stuff about my body and where I get my powers from, and all that. It's like – I get them from another dimension, do you understand? I don't really get it all, but it's like

a whole other universe that's like overlapped on ours but we can't see it, and all the weird stuff I can do comes from moving things back and forth between here and there, does that make sense?"

"Details. Boring. Tell me what's wrong," Mako said breathily.

"Well, it turns out that that's where my real brain – the real me – that's where it is. When they combined me with the life fibers, they took my mind, the part of me that makes me *me*, and they put it there."

"Don't be silly Ryuko, you're right here, with me."

"Well yeah, my body is. But if I'm not in it, then it's like it's not really me. I can't even imagine what the real me looks like, that's what Houka said. And I've been feeling pain less, less than I did when I first got my powers. It's like I'm slowly realizing that my body really is just a puppet, so it doesn't matter what happens to it, and – Uff!" Ryuko was cut off abruptly when Mako, who had been listening quietly to her ranting, suddenly pulled herself on of top of Ryuko, slamming most of her body into Ryuko's stomach and burying her face in Ryuko's chest. It was the classic weighted blanket technique, and Ryuko was definitely not immune to it; already she felt calmer, and sudden contact with all those soft little features even through a nightgown filled her with that deep sense of Mako in a decidedly good way. Especially when she felt the weight of Mako's breasts dropping down and pooling on her stomach.

"How about now? Do you feel like you're really here now?" She looked up with soothing affection in her big brown doe-eyes. "How about now?" She leaned forward, planting her lips around Ryuko's shoulderblade right where it met her neck, applying just the right amount of pressure, just a grazing hint of teeth. Meanwhile, probing fingers dug under Ryuko's pajama shirt, just a subtle ghosting compared to the crushing weight of Mako's entire body, but electric nonetheless. A little noise escaped her lips involuntarily and Mako giggled breathily. She needed to get out there, but on the other hand she wasn't going anywhere until Mako was done with her. And what the hell, what was fifteen minutes gonna cost her?

"How about now? Are you here with me now?" Mako asked one last time as those fingers crept downward ever-so slowly. Her thigh ground up suggestively between Ryuko's legs until the fingers slipped under her pants where they hung poised so, so gently against Ryuko.

"Y'know, I'm still not sure. I think I need more convincin'," Ryuko said slyly, and Mako giggled even louder.

"Now you're getting it, girl!" She said enthusiastically and, after bringing her fingers back up for a quick lick they were inside Ryuko in a flash, radiating throughout her body. With every slight motion Ryuko let out an elated gasp. She was doing her best to stay quiet for the sake of the rest of the family, she really was, but it just wasn't in her nature. This was a rare style for them, so slow, so gentle, so tender; Ryuko couldn't remember ever being pressed so close together as they were right then. She strained, letting out a needy, squeaking groan as she pushed her hips into Mako's hand greedily. This was supposed to be over quick and rough, so she could get on with her night's business, but Mako knew her too well. Whenever that blazing warmth was rising too fast, she took a moment's pause, shifted her

rhythm ever so slightly, and but somehow the lows of these feverish waves were just as electric as the burning highs. Soon enough Ryuko didn't even know how long it had been, it was all she could do to stay focused on those beautiful, shining eyes, the fluttering of that little heart, those fast, hot breaths that spread out across her neck.

"How'm I doing?" Mako whispered.

"I... Ohhh," Was all Ryuko could manage in response.

"That good, huh?"

"Don't... stop," Ryuko said, as if Mako needed to be told. She built Ryuko up agonizingly slowly, and as she started to crest she rocked back her head, hand over her eyes, and let everything else fade out but the warmth. She could tell she was getting louder but she didn't care anymore. Mako apparently did though, and when she reached her shuddering peak she felt lips lock tightly around hers to keep her from screaming in ecstasy, Mako's free hand cradling the back of her head passionately as she worked her through the climax. Eventually the glow faded from her muscles, and when she felt their lips part at last Mako had curled up in the curve of her side, stroking her exposed stomach.

"Ryuko you silly, when are you gonna learn?" Mako said over Ryuko's panting, and with all her senses on fire it rung out like church-bells in Ryuko's head, "It doesn't matter what your powers are, where you come from, what you really are. You're you, that's what you really are! You'll always be you no matter what, and you'll always be my Ryuko."

"Hah... I... I guess I keep relearning that one," Ryuko said as she came back to her senses, "Mako I... God, I love you."

"I love you too, sis,"

"Eh, could you not say that? Especially not after you just got done fucking me?"

"Aw c'mon! I'm just getting you used to it for when you marry Lady Satsuki one day."

"You worry me sometimes, you know that? Putting aside that she's my sister, which still makes it plenty weird you want us to hook up, by the way, I'm pretty sure she's straight."

"What, you don't even know that about your own sister? Nah girl, she is totally into you."

"Please, Satsuki isn't 'into people', if she's 'into' anything its ideas and politics and intellectual shit... You know what, let's not talk about Satsuki now. Besides, it's your turn," Ryuko changed the subject eagerly, sliding a hand up into her nightgown. As usual, there was nothing underneath it. Mako's eyes went wide and she smiled coyly, but she still pulled down the nightgown's hems to impede Ryuko's access.

"Nah, nah it's alright. You've got a job to do." She gave Ryuko a little shove like a cat kneading a blanket before it lays down. Hesitantly, Ryuko sat up. It didn't pain her as

much this time, probably just because she was more awake.

“You sure?”

“Yup! I’ve kept you off those mean streets long enough.”

“Alright. I’ll pay you back tomorrow. With interest, of course,” She wouldn’t let Mako use that tired old line yet again.

“I know you will,” Mako said as she leaned forward to give Ryuko a peck on the wrist, “Now go get ‘em, Ryuko.”

~ February ~

“Ryuko, it’s me,”

“Yeah Sats, I know. Contact info and all that.”

“Right, sorry, I forget people use that feature sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah, weirdo. What’s up.”

“I’m really sorry to tell you this, but I won’t be able to come in tomorrow. I’ll try to be there Sunday.”\

“Oh damn, alright. Is it because of...”

“Yes, it is.”

“Alright... Call me if you’re coming Sunday, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Alright, I’ll let you get back to it, goodbye.”

“Take care, Ryuko,”

*Ah crap, maybe there was something on the news I missed last night, Ryuko thought as she hung up, scrolling over to her phone’s headlines section. And sure enough there was an unread blurb, with attached video and a flashy clickbait title: *AMAZING! Lady Satsuki Kiryuin survives third attempt on her life and carries on with her speech! Watch full video here! **

Ryuko clicked the play button and saw Satsuki standing tall in the center of a stage, illuminated by a soft white-grey light, wearing an unadorned sky-blue gown that had become her preferred garb for public appearances since the end of the war. The bobbing heads of journalists and members of her new government filled the bottom of the camera frame as she

spoke in a proud, declarative voice that was both so similar and so different from the voice that had once been feared throughout Japan. Although equally strident, this one was filled with hope, passion, and reassurance.

“-Our path to a brighter future need not be painted with blood. You are part of the tidal wave that grew from a single ripple to transform this country; we can bring that same ripple to all the other nations of the world. There will be opposition, the powerful and corrupt still benefit from this broken system and will not surrender it easily, and to face them we must embrace a new reality. We will not be intimidated by -,”

A bodyguard suddenly swooped in from the right of the frame. Two rough claps echoed through the stadium, accompanied by screams and panicked gasps, and he fell in front of Satsuki with a brief spurt of blood and the thuds of the high-caliber rounds piercing his Kevlar. For the briefest moment a look of shock and steely resolve could be seen on Satsuki’s face, then the camera shakily panned over to the right into the crowd where a man in a suit keeled over with a gurgle, dropping a bulky pistol onto the ground next to his splayed form. Dozens of needles protruded from odd angles across his body, and the camera zoomed in as the bodyguards who had fired them emerged from the crowd and gathered him up like a rolled carpet.

“As. I. Was. Saying.” The camera swooped back to stage, where Satsuki stood unmoved even as her savior was hauled offstage by some of his comrades, groaning softly. Her voice was even more impassioned now, her hands bundled into fists, and as she lifted one to her heart a stunned hush fell upon the crowd, “We will not be *intimidated* by their overtures. We are faced with men now, not monsters. They can be persuaded, they *will* be persuaded. We will show them the righteousness of our new path, the future we can create, and our resilience in the face of suffering and danger. We will transform them into believers in unity, truth, and peace! And if even in the face of our resolve they remain unmoved, we will remind them what it means to be survivors of Honoujji! I have thanked you all already, from the bottom of my heart, for forgiving me for my past and allowing me to do what I can to help. Now let me also thank you, my friends, for your continued faith in me, in us, in our promise. Let’s keep working to build a world that doesn’t need people like me anymore.”

Satsuki exited the stage to a thunderous applause just as the video feed cut off, and Ryuko was left reeling in both relief and terror. How close Satsuki had come to dying! It could happen again, Ryuko knew, and next time she might not be so lucky. But Satsuki couldn’t die now, not now that she was finally free! Anything was preferable, and Ryuko needed to shout to someone that it wasn’t fair. She opened Satsuki’s contact and pressed the call button, but all she got was a busy signal.

Later that day she would think better of the urge.

Satsuki hung up and turned off her phone, then motioned for Ira to come with her. It had been good of him to hurry to the capital on such short notice – entirely unnecessary, of course – but still good nevertheless. It was nice to see such a familiar face after yesterday evening, even if he did come with an endless litany of apologies and letters of resignation from all of the bodyguards who had failed to stop the assassin before he was within firing range. She

had turned them all down, that was entirely unnecessary too, but such shows of devotion were gratifying too.

“Come in with me, if you’d please,” She said, pausing at the door to the detainee’s cell, “I’ll be putting our new premise into action.”

“Of course, but if you don’t mind, would it not be wiser to use traditional methods here? Getting information from him in a timely manner could be key to locating their ringleaders.”

“On the contrary, this is the perfect time. I would wait years to prove that deprogramming a member of the REVOCS cult is possible.”

The detainee’s cell was sparse but far from spartan. His bed was a pleasantly comfortable memory foam, his sink wide and clean, and his desk stocked with pencils and paper. Presently he sat on the edge of his bed in a state of constant tension, like a stray puppy with paranoia engrained into it from an early age. The handcuffs were off, but he didn’t seem inclined to violence; he’d probably been shown the futility of that when he first came to. He might have been reasonably handsome, with solid facial construction and clear skin, but the tension and the crazed look in his bloodshot eyes made him look more sick than anything. When he saw who had entered his cell those eyes goggled, but he made no move and said nothing.

“Hello, how are you feeling this morning?” No response, “Do you mind if I take a seat?” No response. Satsuki sat down on his desk chair while Ira took up position by the door. “You know, we haven’t figured out your real name yet. What am I supposed to call you?” No response. “I suppose we could start with... Itsuki Sato?” She produced the phony journalist’s ID he had used to get into her press conference the night before, examining it as though she was seeing it for the first time. Part of the technique was to perform nonchalant activities to make yourself seem less threatening, Satsuki was wondering whether it was working but couldn’t parse what his rapidly clenching and unclenching fists meant, “This is very impressive. Practically indistinguishable from the real thing. I’d really like to know who gave you this, you know, I’m sure it would make for an interesting conversation. But what’s even more impressive is how you managed to get a firearm past my security, I’d *really* love to hear more about that.”

The detainee was proving less than responsive, but that was okay. The seeds had been sown. Satsuki stood up, “It might interest you to know you’re the first one we’ve managed to catch alive – all the others were able to finish their cyanide capsules, but my guards were very quick on the draw this time. So, we’ll be making sure you’re every need is taken care of. If you’re bored, we’ll provide you with a television and movies, or maybe some books. If you don’t like the food we’re serving, we’ll provide you with whatever you might like,” She gestured to Ira, “This is Ira Gamagoori. He will be checking in on you every day. You can tell him *anything*. If you’d ever like to speak to me again, just tell him as much and I’ll arrive as soon as I can,” Ira nodded but said nothing, and in this pause Satsuki strained to think of something else to say before she left. “You know, we have every intention of releasing you if you can prove that you’re no threat to society. We’ll give you a chance to start over, if you want it, we aren’t the bad guys here.” That last bit had been inflammatory

by design and it worked, his face contorted with rage and he tried to spit on her, but she was too far away, almost to the door.

She recognized something very familiar in that defeated but still defiant face: here was a man who had expected to be dead by now. Her memories brought back to her what she had supposed would be her last day on Earth. Reflecting with Soroi on her childhood when it had all began, her final toast with her elites (the first- and last-time alcohol would touch her lips, she had thought). How had this nameless assassin commemorated his final day? To him, this place must have no been different from that awful cage where she had lingered for nearly a month in Ragyo's tender care. *The tables have turned, but this time it will be different, because I have patience and understanding. Those are things Ragyo could never understand.*

"Fuck you! You have nothing to offer me! The Prophetess promised us a future free from suffering and the *weakness* of the human race! Your promises are built on lies, there will never be peace, justice, or equality while the sins of human nature still exist! What is there to hope for in your doomed future besides endless war?!" He raged, and Satsuki smiled softly. This was the core of the REVOCS cult's beliefs, then. This was the idea they held that she would need to defeat – fortunately it was a radical one, not likely to sell with the general populace. She walked back over to him, and as he flinch in preparation for a blow she laid a hand on his shoulder. So close up, she could see masses of bruises beneath his jumpsuit. She was ready if he tried to swat her hand away or worse, but instead he just looked up in a state of complete panic.

"Well, luckily for you, you get to live to find out," Satsuki said with a reassuring smile before exiting. Out in the corridor she gave Ira some brief instruction on how to deal with the detainee, then set off to her office to finish the paperwork about him and get a head start on next week's projects. *I have many promises to keep now, it seems. My promise to Rei, my promise to the people of Japan, my promise to myself, and now my promise to this man that he will see the value of my vision for the future. The time may come that I have to break them all, but I hope when I do they will see that I at least tried.*

~ March ~

"Fish, Matoi," Tsumugu said intently, gesturing to the rod and reel she was twiddling lamely.

"Yeah dude, I'm pretty sure there's no fish here," She peered over the side into the inky green-brown water with a grimace. The thin sheen of putrid oil across the surface was almost pretty in the right light, but the smell... normal people must not have been able to detect the petrochemical stink over the sea salt, right? An algae encrusted milk jug drifted by lazily.

"It will look suspicious if we just sit here and don't fish."

"It would look more suspicious for us to be fishing where there's clearly no fish, I think. And besides, there's no-one around." It was true. The featureless expanse of the ocean stretched out, undulating uninterrupted in all directions until it faded into the salty haze. Seagulls were

cawing somewhere, but aside from that the only sound was the smooth lapping of the water on the speedboat's hull.

"Then give it here," Aikuro said, "The point of fishing isn't catching fish, you know. It's relaxing. Not like you'd know anything about that," He joked.

"You only think I can't relax cuz I gotta keep my guard up around your stupid ass," Ryuko shot back, turning out over the water, "Nah, I'll give it a try." She started fussing with the reel hurriedly, anxious not to allow Aikuro or Tsumugu to intervene and show her how. On her first cast she swung the rod with a large portion of her strength, succeeding only in whipping the line around with a faint *woosh* to plop dismally into the water some five feet from the boat.

"One smooth motion. Not too fast. Try again," Tsumugu said with his trademark bluntness as he leant his own reel into its holder, line trailing out smooth into the distance. Ryuko listened and obeyed, she'd gotten used to his style of instruction from their martial arts training, and it worked as usual. The second time she managed to put the hook a good twenty yards from the boat. It did take her a moment to get the bailing to click back into place, but she still thought it looked pretty good for a beginner.

"There we go. Now, can we talk?"

"Certainly. The Kamui, right?" Aikuro said, pulling out his work laptop. It was the only piece of electronics allowed on this boat during these secret laptops, since it had been custom built by Houka so it had none of the hardware required to access the internet, meaning it couldn't possibly be hacked.

"Well, yeah, I wanna talk about the Kamui. Have you guys gotten any further on making it?"

"No, we're currently waiting on Nonon. We'd need her DNA to work on it any further. So, what's up? We know you still don't approve of the project, so lay it on us."

"Wait, I told you I don't disapprove of it *as much* as I do the other one, right? But whatever, you're still gonna do it either way so I've got some stuff to ask about since I'm the only one who's worn a bonded Kamui."

"Well, ask away. Oh, and you can put the rod down now, you'll know if you get a bite."

"Alright. So, uhh... I don't think you guys get just what Kamuis are like. Like, I never fully explained things to you back then. They do more than just communicate with you, tell you stuff about how you're body's doing – they have thoughts and feelings, they're basically people. Even Junketsu was like that, it was a total psycho sure, but people can be psychos too. So when I said that I thought other people should experience it, it's not because having Kamui powers is just so fun, it's because Senketsu was like – I don't know – he just got me, even when we disagreed. I could hear his thoughts and he could hear mine, so he was more than just a friend, more than even a best friend... Like, I don't know how to explain it. It sounds weird when I say it out loud," She crossed an arm over to her elbow awkwardly.

"Like your perfect other half," Aikuro said with a nod, "Does that sound about right?"

“I – yeah, I guess. Where’d you come up with that?”

“Well, we have a hypothesis that when Kamui are made with a human’s DNA their personality mirrors that of their wearer, complements them. It only makes sense, personality is in part determined by genetics and they both have the exact same genetics. I’d go so far as to say that they are essentially the same organism, which might help to explain the obvious mental connection between them. As for the level of consciousness, we had a general idea that they were similar to humans. Houka had at one point thought they were more akin to Artificial Intelligence -,”

“But I corrected that one, don’t worry,” Tsumugu said, “He just didn’t have as much experience with Senketsu as us.”

“Yup, we had arrived at a similar conclusion about how sentient Kamui are as you. Sounds to me like you’ve confirmed what we believed about Kamuis. What about you, Tsumugu?”

“It also confirms to me that if Saiban is incapable of forming that connection with its wearer it’s gonna cause them both a lot of grief, especially if it still remembers when it was first made or still thinks like Junketsu. I’d say if that happens, it would be better to put it out of its misery.”

“Hold on, you can’t just kill it then!”

“We won’t, not without carefully considering it anyway. If it’s like when Satsuki wore Senketsu, with them able to communicate but without that bond, then that should be alright. But if Saiban just turns out to be a Junketsu that can talk?”

“Oh. Alright, fair play, don’t want something like that running around. But that’s another thing, by the way, I gotta say I’m surprised how okay you are with all this. Like, considering this Kamui was what killed your sister, and you like tried to kill me because of that.”

“To tell the truth one thing changed: we have Emergency Rescue Suction Devices. If we’d had one on standby we could’ve saved her, now we have good odds of saving the wearer if something goes wrong again. I would never have agreed to it otherwise. But I will admit that the connection between you and Senketsu has also made me curious. I do think it could work again, although I have my doubts that it will work with Saiban.”

“Huh. I don’t know what I expected of you, that’s – totally logical, as usual,” Ryuko shifted in her seat. She was managing to say focused on the conversation, but Aikuro’s rapid typing was making it difficult. Plus, she kept shifting her view back to the fishing rod to make sure there wasn’t anything happening to it. “So, do you guys remember that press conference Satsuki gave where she nearly got shot?”

“Sure, as I understand her would-be assassin is in high security custody under Ira’s direct supervision. What about it?”

“Well, during the speech Satsuki was saying she didn’t want there to be any more wars, and I believe her, but the thing is you all seem pretty much concluded that you’re making this Kamui so you can use it to fight at least the REVOCS guys and maybe also in like actual

wars against other countries. But you know now that Kamui are like people, so I don't get why you'd do this and not make Goku Uniforms. Like, I got mad at you before when you were treating Senketsu like a weapon, so why're you doing it again?"

"It's precisely because Kamui are more than weapons that we're doing this. Goku Uniforms might have some very primitive form of mind, like an insect or a fish, but besides that they are really just weapons. Shiro and Houka did a lot of testing on that during their time in Honoujji. They also tend to have an effect on their wearer's minds after a while, increasing aggression, not something you want. So this is our gamble – as you know, a Kamui and a well trained wearer makes anything but another Kamui or a hybrid obsolete. Tanks, mecha, goku uniforms, even overwhelming numbers won't save them. And we think that we're the only ones who know how to make a bonded Kamui, the REVOCS cultists might be able to make a Junketsu-style Kamui but I doubt they'd be able to find anyone with Satsuki's mental fortitude to wear it, so if we're right on that then our Kamui would be unstoppable and they'd quickly learn not to oppose it. It might not end their terrorism, but at least it would prevent them from escalating to using Goku Uniforms against us. That's why it's valuable for the Kamui to be sentient: we don't plan for it to do much actual fighting, and once it's done and we can secure peace on our terms it's better if it can have some fulfilling purpose, right?"

"Sure, sure, I guess, but what if they do make another Kamui? Wouldn't that just lead to crazy escalation? I don't know a lot about history, but isn't that what happened when they invented Nukes in the 1900s?"

"Well yes," Aikuro said, "But we were hoping that if something like that happened you could act as our ace. Your only vulnerability is to cross-cutting hardened life fiber weapons, and we've kept that so secret I doubt even your family knows about it. So-,"

"- Oh shit, is it supposed to do that?" Ryuko abruptly interrupted him as her reel started clicking very quickly.

"You've got one!" Aikuro stood up excitedly, "Set the hook! Quick!"

"What? How do I do that?" Ryuko grabbed the reel with a quick, jerky motion and started fumbling with it. Aikuro was now standing at her side, getting real into the fight.

"Give the handle one quick spin then start reeling in steadily," Tsumugu said, still sitting with his arms crossed. He was leaning in however, and giving the appraising half smile that he did during practice when she was on the verge of making a breakthrough.

"You gotta feel the fish on the end, tire him out. Let him run out the line!" Aikuro shouted unhelpfully, contradicting Tsumugu while also using a fishing term Ryuko'd never heard. She'd just figured out how to reel in and was now spinning the handle quick and steady, like Tsumugu had suggested. The rod was bending a little, but nowhere near enough for the line to snap.

"Keep your hands still, focus on stopping the tension on the line."

"When he goes left, you go right!" Aikuro made a huge gesture with his hands, laughing with glee as a flurry of splashing tore up the water.

“Just a little slower.”

“Yeah, lean into it! Oh he’s a fighter alright!”

“Slower.”

“No, let him run it out now! Okay now reel, quick!”

“Keep it steady.”

“There it is! Just a little more slack then you’ve got ‘im!”

“Keep it steady.”

“Guys! Shut the fuck up!” Ryuko shouted, cutting them both off. They were still smiling, and though Ryuko felt a twinge of annoyance she did have to admit it made her kind of excited to see even Tsumugu getting a little into it, “It’s just a fish, I think I’ve got this without advice from the peanut gallery.” And indeed she did, as it didn’t take long for a flashing blob to become visible under the sheen of the ocean surface. Aikuro was there with the net as it was reached the side of the boat, and he hauled it up to reveal...

“Whoa, what *is* that?” Ryuko said, staring at her catch with a curiosity that overwhelmed her disgust. The writhing fish was a dull, brown-tan disc-like creature, soft and slimy like canned peaches. Its flabby mouth gaped in little spasms beneath two goggling eyes that, to Ryuko’s amazement, were on the same side of its head. It seemed only fitting that something so profoundly ugly would live in such polluted waters. *I’m probably lucky to have gotten anything at all. Eh, screw marlin, what’s one fish over another? This’ll do.*

“It’s a flatfish,” Aikuro answered simply.

“No shit,” Ryuko glowered, and he responded with a shit-eating grin.

“No, that’s actually what it’s called.”

“What? What the hell, I mean I guess it’s a fitting name,” Ryuko said as Tsumugu brought out the pliers and started digging the hook out from its lip with a firm hand along its broad side. “So, what’s wrong with it, it irradiated or something?” Ryuko asked.

“Nothing, this is a perfectly healthy fish,” Tsumugu said as he extracted the hook with a grunt, “Not a bad size either.” He offered it up to Ryuko, pinching its lip between thumb and finger, “Wanna hold it?”

“Eh, I’ll pass,” Ryuko said, although she did lean in to get a closer look at it. The detail of its skin was actually far prettier than Ryuko had expected, like a mosaic of puffy ink blots. There was a sort of odd pride in that; maybe her ugly-ass fish wasn’t so bad after all.

“You sure? It’s your fish.”

“It’s customary to take a picture with your catch, you know. I’m sure in comparison you’ll look particularly lovely,” Aikuro said.

“I mean take a picture if you want, but I’m not touching the thing. I’d just hurt it anyway.” Aikuro took that as an invitation, and before Ryuko had really reacted he jostled Tsumugu to stand next to her with the fish and snapped a photo with an old-fashioned polaroid camera he’d produced from somewhere, capturing the look of surprise on Ryuko’s face quite wonderfully as the fish writhed. As it did, Ryuko could swear she saw the inkblots shift, and before she knew it her fish had gone a far darker shade of brown.

“Damn, I’ve never seen shit like this before. You... you aren’t gonna eat it, are you?”

“No, it may be healthy but its still got too much mercury for us to eat. Should I throw it back then?”

“Yeah, might as well,” Ryuko said, and she sat back down as it plonked back into the water.

“Well, looks like you actually got to do some fishing on this trip, how about that?” Aikuro said, relaxing across the bench as if he’d been the one who’d made the catch.

“Yeah, it’s not too bad. I guess I should admit I was wrong about there being nothing here though.”

“Only flatfish, I’m afraid. They’re the only things that can take all the pollution from Tokyo. Now, where were we?”

Ryuko had been thinking about what she’d do if she was asked to fight again since her trip to the lab, and she laid it out for them: “I’ll probably help if you really need it, but I’ll make that decision on my own. I won’t be ordered around.” Aikuro and Tsumugu both agreed that it sounded fair, although hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. In the wake of that dumb little pride she got from catching a fish for the first time Ryuko felt relaxed and not particularly worried about the lab’s projects anymore. The sheer normalcy of it convinced her that none of the drastic scenarios for the future were likely, and that if they did happen they were gonna try and solve the problem, not make things worse. So she was a little surprised when Aikuro broached the “making more hybrids” project. Apparently, he felt the need to apologize for it.

“I meant it when I said the whole thing is theoretical, you know. Shiro, well, he gets ahead of himself sometimes – not to say it’s entirely his fault – but what you heard is his vision for the future of the project, for now what we’re actually working on is if it’s even possible, any implications of how to use it are in the far future.”

“Oh, you’re still talking about that? It’s like I said, you guys are gonna do it either way so I’m not gonna worry about it. At least with this one I know Satsuki will stop you guys from going overboard.”

“Really? I thought you like this project a lot less than the Kamui though.”

“Oh I still don’t like it, I just wasn’t gonna bring it up. So, Shiro does want to eventually turn the whole human race into hybrids, just like, years and years from now?”

“Shiro sees this,” Tsumugu motioned to some plastic scrap drifting along across the ocean’s slimy surface, “As the product of human greed and laziness – inevitable – and thinks the best

long-term solution is to remove our reasons to be greedy and lazy. Truthfully, he's not too fond of humanity in general, you'll have to ask him about that in person though. He's far from the first to have this idea, and in the theoretical sense he's correct that it is *a* solution, but there's plenty more we can do that doesn't involve completely changing the human condition. Most of our research is focused on more practical methods of solving humanity's problems, think of the hybrid project like a last-ditch effort if there's really no other way to make everything sustainable."

"So he's got some hair-brained ideas, does he? Geez, I coulda told you that. So, what do *you* guys think?"

Aikuro sighed, "People have been envisioning futures that are wildly different from the present for basically forever; judgement day, colonizing space, genetic engineering, Artificial Intelligence, what have you. These days most people have given up on those sorts of ideas, but if this turns out to be the one that actually works, then it's not the worst out of our options, really. How I feel about possibly living to see it, well, that's a different story. But if it doesn't work out right, then it's best that we oversee it, so we can stop it before something goes wrong. That sound about right, Tsumugu?" Tsumugu nodded in agreement.

"Alright, I suppose that's fine," Ryuko said, "One last thing that got me worried though. The life fibers have to be implanted on a baby, right? So, you're sure that they won't be in any danger?"

"We are as sure as we can be, don't worry about that one. We've done animal testing and the results are... interesting... but we do know that infants or any species will at least never die from being implanted with life fibers."

"Uh, alright?" *Interesting? What does that mean?* "So long as you're being careful."

"Oh don't worry. I think if we seriously endangered a child Satsuki would kill us herself," He said with a chuckle. "So, does that answer all your concerns?"

"Sure, whatever. But if I think of something else you'll make time for it, right?"

"Of course, if you want we can find something other than fishing to do."

"Nah, fishing's cool. Although I'd prefer to try someplace less polluted next time."

"Really?" Aikuro chuckled, "I must say I never thought you'd actually enjoy it."

"Eh, it's not so bad I guess."

"Yeah, well you try removing the hook next time," Tsumugu smiled snidely. Ryuko smiled back; whenever he used that tone it was a challenge.

"Maybe I will," Ryuko said, "You think I won't stick my hands in fish guts you got another thing coming."

"Ryuko Matoi, you really are full of surprises. You came out here to chew us out for all our projects and now you're gonna learn how to fish," Aikuro said with a laugh, reclining on the

bench with his hands behind his head. A couple extra buttons popped open on his Hawaiian shirt, and Ryuko couldn't help but wonder how that had even happened.

"I mean, is that bad? I told you what I wanted to, and I've never gone fishing before. If you guys feel like you got off easy, remember that if I decide you fucked up I can go wreck the lab whenever I want, so like, whatever, let me fish."

"Fair enough, although we aren't planning on fucking up. Oh hey, your picture's ready! Oho, take a look!" Aikuro held up the polaroid for Ryuko's inspection.

"Ah no! I look terrible!" Ryuko exclaimed, thumbing her face where her hair whipped around in absolute disarray and her eyes squinted blearily into the sun. With her mouth slightly open she looked totally stunned and not at all flattered by the camera. Aikuro quickly whisked the photo away with a laugh and a shit eating grin.

"Oh I'm definitely posting this one now, c'mon Ryuko have a sense of humor."

"Nah, you won't be," Ryuko said. The photo was in her hand now, snatched faster than Aikuro could even perceive, and it slipped away into her pocket equally fast. "I have a carefully maintained online presence of absolutely nothing. I already know enough perverts in real life, don't need to give the ones online any ammo."

"Oh, you're just embarrassed."

"Nah dude."

"Aha yeah, you totally are."

"Am not!"

"But you are!"

They kept up that exchange intermittently for the rest of the afternoon, much to Tsumugu's displeasure, but somehow still managed to catch four more flatfish before they decided to turn in.

Ryuko only showed the picture to Mako before throwing it out. Later that evening, Mako picked it out of the trash, depositing it its final resting place: an incorrectly dated page in her scrapbook.

~ April ~

"I've said it before, but I really didn't expect you to be a country sort of girl," Satsuki said, lifting her feet daintily over the leaf litter. Ryuko meanwhile kept pace with noisy scuffling, sending woodchips and browned leaves flying in short little arcs. The woods they strolled through were far from country; discarded tires and piles of garbage poked up through the

underbrush, the thrum of the city was steady underneath the singing birds, and where the bushes were patchy a highway poked through in indistinct grey streaks behind the green. Still, the rustle of the leaves catching the breeze and the cool, damp forest air were things she hadn't taken the time to enjoy in years. Satsuki had to admit to being surprised that Ryuko had chosen to take time out of her last weekend in Kanagawa to come here, but then if there was a time to be especially contemplative this was it. Graduation was over and done with - Ryuko had managed to pull her grades up just enough to earn her diploma legitimately - and Ryuko's school friends had departed with promises to keep in touch. The apartment felt so quiet with Mako gone, moved into her dorm in Kyoto as of the previous weekend. With her spot at the table empty the remainder of the family had gone oddly quiet as well, feeling the weight of the momentous change that was unfolding. By the next weekend Ryuko too would be gone, and then...

"Well for now I'm just trying to get my last taste in, yknow?" Ryuko responded after a moment. Their conversation plodded along at the same leisurely pace with which they walked, punctuated by long pauses. They weren't going anywhere in particular, "not gonna get even this in Tokyo." Satsuki nodded in response. After much deliberation, Ryuko had chosen to attend the University of Tokyo, course of study still undecided. Although she still wished it were someplace a little less urban, after touring several colleges Ryuko couldn't help but notice that the students there really were less snobby than elsewhere and seemed to just be enjoying life more. Satsuki had made the call to the school president herself, even secured a dorm room in one of the well-constructed old halls Ryuko had been particularly taken with. The school administrators were thrilled that *the* Ryuko Matoi had decided to come to their college, never even asked about grades, and Satsuki found herself paying a significant amount of hush money just to keep them from crowing about it to the news. Now all that was left was to move in and see how it went. "It's different now, too, now that my senses have all gone supercharged. I notice things here that I don't think anyone else does."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, all these little details. Like, plastics and metals and other man-made stuff aren't very interesting to look at up close. But animals, they've got all these little details to 'em, makes you want to stop and take a second look. Even things like bugs - I used to think they were gross, right? But now I can see their, like, exoskeletons or whatever and all these little plates they have. They shine, did you know that? In the right light," Ryuko, suddenly feeling awkward talking about something so bizarre so earnestly, put her hands in her pockets and stared up into the trees, "It's interesting, anyway." Truth be told it was more than interesting, in fact her improved senses might have been her favorite part of her hybrid powers. During the war she'd thought they were only good for helping her perceive attacks moving faster than a normal human could process, but now that she'd had the chance to slow down and take a good look, well, everything was *so* beautiful.

"It is, your powers have given you a very unique perspective. You could become a very proficient biologist with that, have you ever considered that?"

"What? Nah, I don't know anything about that. I don't think I'd make a very good scientist, besides."

“Oh I don’t know, you’ve been doing a lot better in your studies lately. I think you even surprised yourself.”

“Yeah, and it sucked. Don’t want to keep doing that all my life”

“Well, if you don’t have any interest that’s an entirely different story.”

“Wouldn’t say I have no interest, y’know. I like animals just as much as anybody else. But that’s definitely doesn’t mean I want to be a scientist,” Ryuko said, and Satsuki nodded understandingly. After so many talks about what Ryuko wanted to study, her decision was that she would have to just try things and see what she liked. She didn’t get annoyed when Satsuki suggested different possibilities; she had at first, but when she realized that there was no pressure to make a decision behind it, just brainstorming, that went away.

The path joined up with a low, babbling creek, a glittering trail of thin sheens of water over smooth brown stone that crept along parallel to their trail of packed earth and fresh smelling woodchips. When they came to a bend where the water deepened, they leaned over to see if there was anything living there. Satsuki couldn’t see anything, and said as much, but then Ryuko shook her head and pointed out some tiny insects skirting along the surface of the water, gathering up gnats that got stuck on the water’s surface. They were dull brown creatures, but there was a gracefulness to the way they danced over the water that Satsuki could appreciate. No fish or frogs though, unbeknownst to them this creek was poisoned with arsenic and industrial runoff.

“I used to go out to places like this,” Ryuko said as they started away from the bend, “Back when I was in boarding school. Get away from everything, a little peace and quiet.”

“I can imagine,” Satsuki said. A sort of unusual thrill came over her as she listened. *Ryuko’s never opened up about her past before, and now she is, to me!* She crowed, before something else occurred to her, *She’s in an unusually contemplative mood today. I hope she isn’t too worried about anything.*

“Maybe that’s where I get this ‘country-girl’ streak from, y’know? It’s not like I like the open plains, hell, I don’t think I’ve ever even been on one. But I do think I like woods like these. Wasn’t really anybody who knew I would go out there, so it was just my little place. Heh, one time I got on the bad side of a pretty big group of punks, so I hid out in the woods for a couple days. Brought a blanket and everything. They thought I ran away, called Dad and everything, but then I came back when I was ready.”

“Oh really? Well, what did they say?”

“Well, I got the drop on the kids, kicked their asses. Then, it was off to another school; I got transferred, I think that might’ve been the third high school I’d been to. A real dump, honestly.”

“Were you ever at any of them as long as Rinne?”

“Uhh... I don’t think so, actually. Dad would transfer me whenever I started trouble, other kids got into fights like every week but for me it was just once, and I was off somewhere

else. And even this once, I was actually doing pretty good, and he just came along and off I went. He never told me why.”

“That must have been hard.”

“Well, by that point I was used to it.”

“Perhaps the Kiryuin Conglomerate was closing in on his trail, or possibly was close to finding you. I-I won’t pretend that makes it alright, though.”

“Nah, I’m over that. He had his reasons,” Ryuko lied. They came upon a point where the path sloped down into a gully so that it flowed right along the side of the stream. They could have waded in if they’d wanted, or maybe launched a very small boat. Ryuko paused here. “I had a hideout in sophomore year that looked just like this,” She said quietly, “Okay, well maybe not just like this, it was deep in the woods so there wasn’t a path to it. That was better because most people don’t go off the paths. But the sort of shape of the creek here was very similar”

“Seems like a pretty spot.”

“Oh yeah, it was,” She said, then started with a short laugh, “I actually had a TV and an old car battery to run it down there, and I would steal movies from the store just so I had something to do. Heh, it’s probably still there now.”

“How ingenious. That must be how you’ve become such a film buff.”

“Oh nah, most of the movies I showed I watched when I was home, not much to do there either. I wound up watching the same movies over and over there because I couldn’t swipe all that many.”

“Ah. Makes sense.” Satsuki said as they carried on.

“You know, that was where I found out I was lesbian,” Ryuko blurted quite abruptly, then, surprised that she’d actually said that out loud, she slowed down and glanced at Satsuki, mouth slightly open. Satsuki too was surprised, she hadn’t expected Ryuko to open up that much, and realizing that her reaction was under scrutiny she looked back with a slight smile. “Don’t worry, there was another girl, wasn’t just me ogling some movie star,” Ryuko said with a chuckle, deciding to play it off casually.

“Who was she?” Satsuki asked softly, eyes soft and curious. Her heart was pounding, thrilled to finally be having a long-overdue heart-to-heart with her sister. *Sisters should know this stuff about each other, even estranged ones, even ones who care more about this information than they should.* She couldn’t let that show, though, she was determined to be the perfect audience for what had already deduced was a fairly emotional tale.

“Who was she? Ah, well, she was in my homeroom, probably my only friend at that school. Her name was Mai; we were real quiet types together, although she did well in her classes

and I just moped around. Her other friends made fun of her for hanging around with me, but she did it anyway. One day she came with me out to my hideout after classes were done and... One thing led to another, you know?"

"I can imagine. Were you – did you – suspect before then?"

"Honestly no. I always wondered what other girls saw in guys, but I didn't really think about why. She was the one who started it since I didn't know, but I was very much not opposed."

"You don't have to go into detail about it, you know."

"I know, I won't, I don't want to," Ryuko said quickly, holding up her hands, "It's not an exciting story anyway. I think we hung out like that a few more times, maybe five or six."

"So you didn't feel strange about it, or that you were wrong for not feeling the same way as other girls?"

"Actually, it was more like the opposite. It was a relief really, because then I could make sense of it all."

"Not much like mine, then."

"Why's that?" Ryuko said, then suddenly straightened up with a look of red-faced shock, "Wait, holy shit Sats, I thought you were straight!"

"A story for another day," Satsuki said, smiling, kicking herself for even bringing it up. Ryuko seemed to register that with just a little "huh", so Satsuki continued. "So, what happened with Mai?"

"Yeah, that's where it gets a little heavy. I got into another fight, got transferred, never saw her again."

"That's awful."

"It's alright. The worst part, though, was that it was a fight about her," Satsuki's eyebrows registered surprise and sadness, and Ryuko pushed on in a rough voice, "Yeah, she turned down some dude and he didn't like that very much. By the way, she woulda turned him down even if she was into guys, dude was a real creep. Anyway, what was I supposed to do?" Before she knew it Satsuki's arms were around her shoulders, face in her hair. This was only the second time Satsuki had abruptly hugged her like, in fact as far as Ryuko knew it was the second time she had ever done it.

"I'm sorry," She said with a soft, ragged breath. Her imagination had carried her away, an entire tragedy played out in miniature over just a couple months. Just another stop on Ryuko's chaotic childhood. No wonder the prospect of college was making her so pensive. It was shameful that it had taken this long, but she felt like she was finally starting to see why Ryuko was the way she was.

"Whoa, hey Sats, it's alright." Ryuko said, holding her arms up defensively. That didn't last long though, and she return the hug as she continued, "That was years ago. I'm over all that

now.”

“I know,” Satsuki said as they parted, “It’s just a sad story, like you said. But still, I’m glad to hear it, I’m glad you’re comfortable telling me this sort of thing.”

“You big sap. If only the others knew.”

“Nonon knows. She might be the only one who knows more than you.”

“Echh, right, the others besides Nonon, then,” Ryuko said, then, tilting her head with curiosity, “So, in the spirit of such, you sure you don’t wanna tell me yours? Sisters should know this sort of stuff about each other, right?”

“I’m sorry, but I’d really rather not. It’s just -,” Satsuki began abruptly with a stricken look on her face, but Ryuko cut her off.

“Nah, you’re fine,” As soon as she’d asked, Ryuko’s mind had filled in the answer for her. She knew she was no genius, and she was okay with that, but she wasn’t so dumb that she couldn’t fill in dots – who Satsuki had grown up around, what they had been like - and come to the logical conclusion. If she’d said it though, then Ryuko could have had her turn to throw her arms around her sister and prove she cared. But if she looked so pained just trying to get out of saying it, then it wouldn’t be right to force it. So, if she knew, then what was the point of saying it? Shit like that should be forgotten in the past anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Although it's never explicitly stated that hybrids have hyper-advanced senses, it's frankly the only way the speed at which Ragyo fights can possibly work, and also an idea I wanted to explore more. So that's what we're doing.

In which Satsuki and Nonon go to lunch

Chapter Notes

This takes place in between the February and March vignettes from the previous chapter.

Thanks to the demands of leadership, both of the Kiryuin Foundation and the remains of the Jakuzure dynasty, the heiresses of these illustrious houses wound up holding their traditional monthly lunch early on a rainy Wednesday morning in February. This time it had been Satsuki's turn to pick the restaurant, and she'd settled on a lavish French place in central Kanagawa. They always ended up in these sorts of fancy establishments, even while joking with chagrin about how spoiled they were. Still, tearooms like this had their benefits; private tables in secluded nooks, for example, where top secret business could be discussed. And there was plenty to talk about, it was proving to be an eventful month. Nonon's role in dismantling her family's megacorp was going along smoothly, in essence she no longer had to really do anything about it, just let her underlings follow through on the plan. What really mattered was her other, more secret role as an ear in on high society, keeping track of reactions to Satsuki's reformation of the country's government.

The return of democracy, along with taxes and regulations and even plenty of outright property seizures, was bound to create some dissidents. Most understood that it was their position of power and privilege that had allowed Ragyo to go unchallenged for so long, to say nothing of the suffering of their subjects, but others... they would be monitored closely to ferret out any donations to unsavory, anti-government parties. To know the difference, one had to be well versed in the - sometimes steeped in intrigue and subtly, sometime completely raucous and coarse - gossip and cliques of the upper crust. Satsuki employed other similar listeners at the galas and corporate offices of Japan, but of course none of them outranked Nonon, and none were in a better position than her to be of use. She had the fortune, the noble birth, the fame, and something else: a genuine desire to be surrounded by the world of high-class luxury. Satsuki must have known, she could read anybody like a book, but Nonon burned with shame at the thought of saying it out loud.

If only she could replicate Satsuki's acetic discipline, her genuine preference for the humble and modest, but try as she might Nonon felt at home amidst the snobs, or better yet the other wannabe punks coasting off their family's fortunes. What a fraud she was in the face of Ryuko, a genuine gutter rat who'd actually been through something in her time (before the war anyway, that definitely counted as something too); in comparison being anything other than a dainty young lady was just an act for Nonon. In the battle for Satsuki's affection, that was the handicap against which she always struggled. If Ryuko was ever clever enough to point that out in their verbal sparring she would have died on the spot, and on the other hand she would rather die than reveal this critical weakness. At least she was good at keeping up on the high society gossip, and discussion of all the important details she'd overheard carried

the conversation through all the way until their food was delivered. She never questioned exactly why her information was valuable, if Satsuki thought it was then it was.

“Well, now that that’s out of the way,” Nonon said between bites of her sandwich, “What’d you think of my latest album?”

“Excellent as always,” Satsuki answered, and Nonon blushed into her lap. Satsuki always got an advance copy of her compositions, lately mostly electronic music but with unorthodox instrumentation and beats inspired by the orchestral music she grew up with. Truthfully, they both preferred that more classical style, but with plenty of work to do Nonon didn’t have time to realize her ambition of putting together her own orchestra, not yet anyway. Still, Satsuki could appreciate the artistry, and had to admit that she did find it catchy. Too many love songs, though. “I particularly like, er, what was it, the third one? That starts out with the blaring hornline first thing you hear? You know the one.”

“I do, I do, I’m very happy with that one as well. D’ya think I should start putting names on ‘em?”

“It wouldn’t come amiss. Although I find that sometimes I associate the name of the song with it too strongly and I get distracted from it trying to figure out the meaning.”

“I uh, I mean maybe, but I doubt most people are thinking about it that hard.” That was Satsuki for you, always analyzing everything. Ten steps ahead of everyone else, if not more. But it did make it hard for her to relax and just enjoy some music here and there, she seemed to be worried that she wasn’t enjoying it the right way sometimes. “It’s hard to think of names because my songs aren’t really about anything.”

“Right, if you say so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh nothing,” Satsuki said with a smug smile, “Just, it’s a lot of love songs, though.”

“Oh, you shut up!” Nonon’s cheeks were still a little red, but she shot back playfully, “They’re popular!”

“Indeed, they are. Speaking of which, will you be publishing this one?”

“Eh, I’ll just release it on my website. Not like I need the money. And it’s already been leaked, so I might as well.” She shrugged, “I’ll give it a few more days to build up hype. Then I’ll drop it.”

“Makes sense,” Satsuki said, then paused to eat some more. She wished she knew more about music so that she could converse more intellectually about Nonon’s craft, but she did have something else to discuss, “So, how are things going besides that?”

“Oh, fine.”

“Still making time for friends?”

“I – yeah?”

“Really? You haven’t been by Houka’s in a while.”

“Well, I – I mean –,” Nonon stuttered defensively. She should have expected this would come up today, “I’ve been busy!”

“Hmm,” Satsuki said simply, then smiled one of her gentle, tired looking smiles. “Nonon, what’s been going on lately? I know you and Houka are on the outs, but Shiro hasn’t told me why.”

“Oh geez, he told you about that? Look, it’s really nothing. We had a little argument, happens sometimes.”

“But still, he’s your *best friend*.”

“First off, he’s not my best friend,” Nonon said, and when Satsuki’s eyebrows rose she smiled, “You are!”

“Oh, I – thankyou Nonon.”

“But besides that, don’t worry, we’ll make up eventually.”

“I see,” Satsuki said, then took a sip of her tea, “Any idea when eventually might be?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“I must admit, I do have a motive in asking. Apparently, when Houka can’t text you he can’t stop himself from texting Shiro even when they’re working right in the same room, and then Shiro gets distracted and he starts texting me and... well, you see how it goes,” Satsuki said with a smile. Nonon was in full defense mode now, not her strong suit, but the thought of having inadvertently interrupted Satsuki’s important work struck her just as much as if Satsuki had straight up yelled at her. Not that Satsuki was at all upset. In truth, Nonon’s expressiveness was a source of great amusement to her, a gift that she couldn’t help but revel in and, now that they could talk frankly as friends, occasionally agitate.

“W-What! Hey c’mon that’s not my fault its Houka’s for being addicted to that phone of his! Besides, he should be apologizing to me anyway! If he were my best friend, he would have taken my side.”

“There we go. Taking your side against who, now?”

“Ah shit, I said that out loud?” *Is it possible that I kinda wanted to tell her anyway? Oh well, what the hell, time to come clean.* “Well, you got me fair and square. Against Sanageyama, who did you think?”

“Oh of course!” Satsuki seemed relieved to have it all laid out, “ ‘The Monkey’. Why didn’t I think of that? So, it’s really him you have trouble with.” Nonon nodded, “If I recall, you

didn't go to his going away party, did you? Have you two been at odds since then?"

"Ugh, him and his trip. It's all anybody talks about. 'Oh, what country's he in now? Is he having fun?' As if I know, or care. And have you seen what he's been posting? I don't think he's got a single picture of him at an actual kendo tournament. It's always in a bar, beer in one hand, some – some random girl in the other! Sometimes two in the same night!" She said with a disgusted scoff.

"I'm sure he's just meeting fans. He's got lots of pictures of him with guys and whole groups of fans too – and I've seen pictures of him getting drinks with other famous martial artists too. This must just be what they do to socialize after the tournament is over."

"Yeah right," Nonon spat, then, realizing that although they were talking as friends that was still a little rude, she backtracked, "You're lucky Satsuki, you never had to read this sort of bullshit from guys. There's a certain type of dumbass frat-boy jerk you just have to expect to jump on women first chance he gets, and unfortunately he fits the bill perfectly."

"It surprises me, if I'm being frank, to hear you talking about Uzu like this. You had your spats back in the old days, but I thought you always made up."

"Yeah, it probably does. But - I hate to break it to you – we were never friends. We were only working together because we had to but believe me I was *more* than happy to get away from that asshole – which is what he's always been, by the way."

"I was there Nonon, I *know* that's not true," Satsuki said sternly, but Nonon crossed her arms resolutely, "But if you don't want to tell me what's the matter between you and Uzu, that's fine, he's halfway around the world. But please, make up with Houka. He's barely even involved in this, and I know he really wants to hear from you."

"Okay, fine," Nonon conceded, and with a nod and a sip of her tea Satsuki moved the conversation on to something else – conversion of the old Kiryuin Manor into a museum commemorating the Life Fiber War. Satsuki had wanted to torch the place to the ground; the REVOCS cultists had already ransacked it for everything it was worth both in priceless antiques and life fiber tech basically the moment the Cocoon Sphere broke, nothing was left but a gutted monolith. Nonon was proud to have been – with help from Houka – the one to talk her out of it. They'd finally found sculptors to produce replicas of all the Goku uniforms and Kamuis. However, there'd been a little hitch when the guy they'd hired to do the main statue of Ryuko – a true master, but also a true diva – got into a little fit because Ryuko refused to model for him and especially refused to wear a replica of Senketsu in order to do so. Ordinarily Nonon would have advised just making her do it anyway, but her mind wasn't really on it. So eventually they ran out of things to say, and went back to eating for a while. Long enough for Nonon to make up her mind.

"You want to know what it's really about?"

"Um, yes? You mean about Uzu?"

"Yeah... b-but I meant everything I said before, though."

“I... see? Nonon what’s wrong? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, you know,” Satsuki was looking at her with a curious, concerned glance, but those eyes pierced her to the core anyway. *She must know, right? Oh, I’m such an idiot. But if she knows and she’s not upset at me yet, then I guess it is okay.*

“Do you remember that time when we were on the Naked Sol and Houka made that ‘get a room’ joke to Sanageyama and me.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it wasn’t entirely a joke. I mean, it was a joke, but it was based on... We were hiding in Osaka that whole month, right? Every day they were getting closer, it didn’t look like we had much of a chance. So, Sanageyama and I... we may have exchanged some words.”

“Oh?”

“A-and a little more than that, too,”

“Really? Wait – you don’t mean -,”

“- No no - I meant making out! Saliva, you get it? I guess that’s what I get for trying to be cute. We didn’t go all the way with it!” Nonon blurted with a frantic wave of her hand and a beet red face. “We agreed it was just an in-the-moment thing, wasn’t gonna make things awkward between us or affect what we had to do, but... well, I agreed anyway. You can guess how well that went.”

“I see. So, if I’m understanding correctly, you and Uza – on the premise that you were going to die soon -,”

“- Yes, on the premise that we were going to die-,”

“-You had a fling, but now you don’t want anything to do with him and he doesn’t feel the same way.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Nonon said quietly, looking down at her plate. She was going to go on, but Satsuki suddenly sat upright, struck by a bolt of inspiration.

“You’re not over him, are you?” She guessed, correctly, and in response Nonon wrapped a hand around her temple with a groan and a morose little laugh.

“Fuck me, right? Of all the fucking idiots in the world, here I am. I – I’m sorry, I know it’s stupid.”

“Nonon, you don’t have to apologize. It so happens I understand completely.”

“Wait, you do? No way. Who is she?” Nonon asked, pulling her head up breathlessly. Now it was Satsuki’s turn to look a little embarrassed.

“Oh, well, I’m not gonna be telling you *that*,” She said, looking off the side and smiling. Nonon didn’t dare press the question, the thought hardly even occurred to her, “Not now,

anyway. Besides, I'm over it now, so it hardly matters. I just know what it feels like."

"But I don't want to get over it. Or at least, I don't think I do. I don't know. I still mean everything I said before, you know. He's *such* a jerk, I really don't know why I'm so torn up about it"

Satsuki nodded, "He's definitely got some maturing to do, that's an open secret. But I think he's able to mature; remember how far he went after Ryuko beat him the first time? Do you think he would have done that – admitted he'd needed to improve – when we first met? When he sees something he wants, he'll do what it takes to get it, so maybe there's hope for him yet."

But that's the trouble. When he sees something he wants... he should have known what it would take for me to consider him last time I told him off. But then he left. The thought made her heart sink, not the least because she was sitting right across from Satsuki, the woman Uzu hadn't stopped trying to woo all the way up until he sewed his eyes shut (long after he should have learned she was not interested in men). He'd only stopped then because he had found a sort of peace in focusing on his own self-improvement, and though Nonon hadn't thought much of it then, now, well how was she supposed to compare to Satsuki? "I mean maybe," She said morosely. Satsuki frowned.

"You don't believe that?"

"I don't know. I think he's still the exact same as ever, and *obviously* I like some parts of that, but there's just no way I could date someone so irresponsible and inconsistent – not to mention womanizing," Satsuki had known Nonon long enough to suspect that the same bad-boy charm that she was railing against was really part of Uzu that attracted her, but she declined to suggest this.

"But you would want to date him, if it weren't for that

"I-I don't know."

"That seems like a pretty important thing to know."

"Oh geez," Nonon said, one of her rare outbursts of frustration in response to something Satsuki said, "Not everything is so simple as it is for you. You could have any woman you wanted, so you can afford to think about all the pros and cons nice and neat."

"I – um, thank you?" *Oh, if only she knew*, Satsuki thought, but she wasn't about to burst in and tell Nonon all the ways she'd misjudged her situation.

"But a guy like Sanageyama being into a girl like me, that's a rare thing!" She continued, not mentioning that creeping feeling that maybe she'd already missed her chance. Satsuki was visibly taken aback by this sudden admission of insecurity. Words she'd written in her data log of the students of Honoujji Academy came back to her now: *Jakuzure will never admit to a weakness of any kind except in situations of extreme need or emotional stress. However, she will act on the resultant insecurities at the slightest suggestion. This, in combination with her deep admiration for and loyalty to me, is the surest method of controlling her.*

“If that’s what you really think, then I think you should put him behind you immediately, just so you can see how wrong you are.”

Nonon giggled in embarrassment but was still looking down at the tablecloth (a waiter had come and cleared their plates at some point, she’d barely noticed), “Satsuki, you don’t have to say stuff like that.”

“Even if I mean it?”

“C’mon, our situations are so different, and you know it.”

“No, I don’t, and you need to learn to take a compliment.”

“Okay, fine, um, thankyou. How was that?”

"More artificial than I expected, but at least you said it."

"Oh gee - you just love acting like you know every little thing I'm gonna do, don't you?"

"Well, I have know you for 83% percent of your life. So it should come as no surprise. But please, can we get back to subject at hand? If I know everything you're gonna do, then I'd say you're gonna feel better after you talk to me about it."

"Ok, fine," Nonon sighd, but instead of launching into that they wound up taking another pause in their conversation, in which they both finished their food. Eventually, Nonon asked “With yours, did you ever feel like maybe it would be nice to just forget it, but then you’d meet her again years later and you’d realize you’d made a huge mistake?”

“No, I can’t say that I ever felt that way,” *Not like I’d ever lose track of her again, considering I see her every weekend and plan on keeping it that way. Which, come to think of it, did help me stop worrying and learn to love her as a sister. What Nonon really needs is probably for Uzu to come back so she finds out for sure how she feels about him.* “It was more like I didn’t know if I wanted to kiss her or kill her half the time.”

“Yeah, there’s that too,” Nonon said, “Heh, do I ever know that feeling.” Satsuki had a moment of worry that Nonon would be able to figure out who she was referring to from that, but she was too deep in thought. “How did you get over your... er... crush or whatever? It must’ve been after the war, right?”

“Hmm, well I suppose my feelings just changed eventually. I’m still very fond of her, but other, more important things distracted me and when I came back, it wasn’t the same.”

“Just like that, huh?” *Kind of scary to think something so important could just change like that. She’s probably not telling me the whole story though.*

“But it’s not the same as yours, so I don’t know what will happen with you.”

“I don’t have anything important that I’m up to right now, so there’s that.”

“Well, that might change shortly.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s one more piece of business I have for you. Come, let’s go someplace more private.”

“Holy shit. Is that what I think it is?” Nonon asked, mouth agape, coiled up next to Satsuki in the back of the bulletproof luxury sedan she rode just about everywhere. She’d thought she would find it hard to ignore that thin whine that her sound negation field was projecting around the chassis, but the emerald green dress in the old-fashioned film photo Satsuki handed her held her full attention. Everything seemed to vanish into that photo, her head and heart pounding in unison. It was like the feeling of Christmas Eve, if it was tinged with a cloying, panicky feeling. This couldn’t be real, could it?

“It is. This is the Kamui that killed Tsumugu’s sister Kinue. It is currently unfinished as we attempt to convert it into a bonded, sentient Kamui like Ryuko’s Senketsu. It’s called Kamui Saiban.”

“Holy shit. So you’re actually going through with it?”

“Yes, this is, hopefully, our answer to REVOCS. Well it will be, if and when we find someone to wear it.”

“Wh-why are you showing me this? You don’t really mean me, do you?”

“What do you think?” Satsuki looked up from the photo, and when Nonon saw the fire in her eyes she couldn’t help scooting backwards, uncomfortable to be in such close contact all of a sudden.

“Hooooooo…” Nonon trailed off, at a complete loss for words. Her mind was racing with the possibilities. She saw herself at the pinnacle, heights of power only three had ever attained before – only one of whom had even been human. She would be taking Satsuki’s place. All the spotlights were on her. The power to level cities, the power to fly, the power to go anywhere, do anything, all of it could be hers if that’s what she wanted. If that’s what she wanted. “Are you ordering me to wear it?”

“No, of course not. With the risks involved, there’s no way I could in good conscience. And besides that, if you accept, you will be expected to fight and kill if it comes to that.”

“Risks? It isn’t gonna try and mind-rape me like Junketsu, is it?”

“I hope not, but the fact is we don’t know. Hopefully, it will be similar to Senketsu and will bond to you as though that was its only purpose in life – which it will be. But we don’t know for sure.”

“I mean, it killed someone already.”

“If something goes wrong, we’ll have suction devices to pull it off you. And Ryuko will be there; if something goes really wrong she’ll just rip it off you and destroy it.”

“And what if it were like when Junketsu took over Ryuko and it made me say everything was fine when it really wasn’t?”

“Ryuko and I both have experience with that sensation, I’m confident we can recognize the problem before it becomes one. Nonon, are your only objections those pertaining to your safety? You need to consider this very carefully. If you accept, you will have a responsibility to the entire world – not just following my orders, you’ll be the one in control and consequences of your actions would be in your hands. Do you want that pressure on yourself?”

“Geez, yeah I know, let me think,” Nonon said. And she did, staring at the picture as Satsuki looked away. How could eyes directed out the window still bore right through her? “So why did you come to me? It’s, I mean, if it’s such a big deal?”

“You’re the best for the job. Who else would I go to?”

“I – well thanks, but I thought you’d have wanted it yourself. Or you could have given it to Ryuko, stupid though that would have been.”

“Ryuko would never wear it, to respect Senketsu’s memory, and she doesn’t need it anyway. As for me, well, I told you I made a promise to myself never to take another life, didn’t I?”

“But, well, look at me, I’ve gotten soft. I haven’t *really* exercised in months. I’m not even sure I was ever strong enough to handle it, especially not now.”

“Then you would have to train harder than you ever have before. You can do that, can’t you?”

Nonon thought for a while more. It wasn’t getting her very far. Everything logical was telling her to refuse: the risk that it would just straight up kill her, the responsibility, especially the idea of fighting once again. Voluntarily stepping up to almost definitely kill people and possibly die herself - she’d felt such a relief when she realized that was behind her – and now how could she go back to it? Oddly, the thought that came to her first was the people she would be leaving behind. Not her family, of course, fuck them, but Satsuki and Houka and the others. Satsuki would blame herself, obviously, and that hurt to think about. But not as much as Uzu. *He’d better fucking cry for me.* But even in spite of that, the image of her backlit in radiant gold, Saiban’s hems flapping in the breeze, stayed so near she could almost touch it. That could be real. All she had to do was say yes.

“If I do this, it’s gonna take over my whole life, isn’t it? I won’t have time for anything else.”

“Yes, and it could last for years. And if you believe Ryuko, which I do, more than anyone else, it will change your life in... other ways, too.”

“Yeah, cuz they’re alive, aren’t they? Will mine talk to me, too?”

“I believe it will, but it’s more than talk. Apparently, it’s like Senketsu was... inside Ryuko’s mind somehow. Their thoughts, it seems, were connected on some level. She said the experience was ‘like nothing else’, if I’m quoting correctly.”

“Really,” Nonon said with more than a little skepticism. Ryuko was far from the most reliable source on something like this; call it an overactive imagination, some sort of perverted sentimentality, maybe even straight up mental instability. Look at who she was dating – Mako, who talked to herself constantly - and you got a pretty good idea where her head was at.

“You’ll have to ask her about it yourself. All I ever heard from Junketsu were whispers – in my ears, not my head.”

"Oh so the talking part is definitely real?"

"Yes, I even heard Senketsu just once or twice. Apparently it could communicate to other people besides Ryuko, but it was really difficult. It had a silky, calm voice. I could see why Ryuko liked it so much."

“Was it hard, wearing Junketsu?”

“I won’t lie, every moment was brutal when it was powered on. Until Shiro tamed it, I could barely control it for twenty minutes at a time.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Hmhmhm,” Satsuki let out one of her little hum-chuckles, “I’ll take that as a complement to my ability to hold my composure. But I wouldn’t expect that to be what you experience. Unless you don’t embrace it, that is. Ryuko says as soon as she learned to do that it wasn’t just painless, it was really exhilarating. But you’ll have to ask her about that.”

“It wasn’t exhilarating for you?”

“No, is that surprising? I had to stay too focused to worry about things like that.”

“Even when you were flying?”

“Oh, that,” Satsuki smiled wistfully, “Ok, I suppose that was... fun, almost. Looking back, I do wish there had been the time to fly for longer.”

“Because I loved flying in my Goku uniforms, especially the Mk.2 and 3. It was never nearly as fast as a Kamui, but still.” *I’m not about to say yes just so I can fly again, am I? No, that’s absurd, I haven’t decided anything.* But the memory of the world stretching out underneath her like a diorama, especially during the battle of Osaka when the ground had been riven by explosions and gunfire as far as the eye could see, gave her goosebumps. She pulled the picture closely, examined Saiban. There were still lots of empty and thin patches where the garment was clearly incomplete, but she knew exactly what it would look like. What it would look like when it powered up, well, that would probably be a surprise until she tried it.

“Ugh, so not my style,” She said. This was true, Nonon’s preference was either for the baggy and casual or the crisp and skintight. Today she split the difference with a thick sky-blue wool sweater that hung loose on one shoulder and skinny jeans. Satsuki wondered idly if

maybe she would have preferred a Kamui like Senketsu and Junketsu that was designed to resemble a uniform, not a fancy dress.

“Well, that can’t be changed now. If it makes any difference, I think you’d look stunning in it.”

Nonon wasn’t really listening. She’d run through the same thoughts so many times it was beginning to cloy at her mouth. There was only one conclusion that actually stuck. She’d sworn that she would see the world from the same heights Satsuki did, but despite her striving there had always been a gap. The gap between one who was worthy to wear a Kamui and one who wasn’t. The reverence she inspired, the belief in her vision, the infatuation of... certain individuals... all a product of what lay in the gap. Satsuki wasn’t the only one with a vision, but until now Nonon had known that the gap between them was what made it possible for Satsuki to realize hers. Now the gap could be gone, all she had to do was say yes. Death and bloodshed, responsibility to the world, training all day and night, it meant nothing compared to that. She hadn’t even considered how long she’d been sitting silently in contemplation until Satsuki reached over to take the photo from her fingers.

“Ah what the hell. I’ll do it.”

In which Satsuki checks in at Tokyo University

“You’ve probably never eaten at the dining hall, have you?”

“No, I can’t say I have. Graduate students don’t really have to spend much time on campus, and I in particular am hardly ever in town.”

“Heh, I sure know that. Well it’s not that bad, if you just want something quick to eat,” Ryuko suggested, although she really wasn’t interested in eating there. The idea had been that they would meet for lunch, but since the sisters had spent a good hour just wandering around campus talking, eating clearly wasn’t the priority. “A friend of mine probably got food poisoning from the sushi once, but I can’t get food poisoning, so I just eat it anyway. Tastes fine.”

“Well that’s not good. You should report things like that, not let them get away with inferior service.”

“Ah chill out Sats, not everything has to be a battle. Sometimes you just want lunch. Besides, it wasn’t like they meant it. Shit just happens sometimes.”

“Perhaps. Either way, I’d rather not go to the dining hall, just for fear of being recognized.”

“Yeah, why risk it? Well then, let’s figure it out on the way back to your place? I have an idea where the paparazzi will never think to look for you.”

The restaurant Ryuko wound up choosing was a sort of general-purpose sushi/ramen/comfort food place, the sort of hole-in-the-wall that locals swore by but nobody else had even heard of. She’d been right about it being secluded, but Satsuki suspected that she’d actually chosen it just because she was in a sushi mood. If the way Ryuko was scarfing down her order was anything to go by, her suspicions had been correct. She seemed to be a regular here, because the lady behind the counter was already writing out an order while they were still saying hellos. Her interaction with the cashier was also familiar, all she did was slap a couple bills down and carry on her way. Satsuki couldn’t help but smile at the coziness of the establishment, even though the back of her flimsy plastic chair was all but pushed up against the one behind her. It was nice to hear the fryers working right behind the counter and the friendly greetings of the regular customers strolling in the doors, the faint rustle of all the posters coating the walls every time the wind swept through. Ryuko seemed to luxuriate in it too, which only made her feel ever more at home.

“You know, I appreciate ya coming down here to hang out, but I gotta wonder, aren’t you worried about like,” Ryuko strained to think of a way to say what she meant without getting into secret topics, “y’know, somebody... trying to ‘start something’, so to speak? Like shouldn’t you have somebody watching your back or something?”

“Ah I see, yes I know what you’re alluding to. Let me let you in on a little secret then, which I think you’ll find comforting.” She leaned in close so that she could speak extremely softly. Only her perfect intonation kept it from being a whisper, “You’re sitting right next to one of my bodyguards.”

“Huh?” Ryuko spun around to the man behind her. He appeared to just be an average man of fifty or sixty, methodically eating his bowl of ramen while scrolling through the news on his phone. But he looked up and gave Ryuko a knowing glance and a barely perceptible twitch of a smile. “Whoa dude.”

“There are several others in here and on the street, as well as two surveillance vehicles and more up in the buildings. We are quite safe, I can assure you.”

“And you always travel like this?”

“Yes, in my position I couldn’t afford not to.”

“Even all those times when you came to visit? And stayed over?” Satsuki saw the problem now. Ryuko looked at her very intensely, and she was sure that if she didn’t have to speak softly that would have sounded very accusatory.

“Well, yes.”

“Ach! C’mon, what the hell Satsuki? You’ve had your goons snooping on us the whole time?”

“Of course I did. I need them, it’s inevitable in my position. Surely you’ve realized that by now.”

“Yeah, fine, but you couldn’t have told us?”

“What difference did it make? They’ve never gotten in the way, have they?”

“That’s not important! You should tell people if there’s someone watching them when they’re sleeping! Even if they aren’t peeping on ‘em” She whisper-shouted. Satsuki scrunched her face up. She understood that full well, but she hadn’t told the Mankanshoku’s the first time she’d visited because she’d been concerned they might not understand and would ask her not to bring her bodyguards around. Which wouldn’t do at all. Now, she was fairly sure they would have been alright with it, but how to tell them she’d already had them under surveillance after the fact? She was worried that they would take it about as well as Ryuko was right now. Still, she couldn’t back down, not on something so important.

“Maybe, but I can assure my security detail would never extend their bounds into your privacy. There’s only one person to whom their loyalty is deeper than it is to me: you.”

“You don’t say,” Ryuko growled.

“If you ordered the man behind me to shoot me, he would do so without hesitation. That is the degree of their loyalty to you.” Ryuko’s eyes widened a little bit at that, her mouth dropping open just a little bit, with what Satsuki thought was a very becoming curve

of the lip. It reminded her of nothing more than their reunion on the Naked Sol, when Satsuki had been prepared to take a full power punch from Ryuko and Senketsu. Was she really so fucked up that Ryuko looked more beautiful than ever just when Satsuki willingly put her own life in her hands? Even though she knew there was no conceivable scenario where Ryuko would seriously give the order, she still nearly broke her composure at the thought. *No, that can't be right. It's just the way the light streams through the windows here.*

“And if I told him to fuck off and leave me alone, would he do that?”

“Er, no. That is the one order which he would never follow.”

“What the hell. Where do you even find these people?”

“Many of them are Honoujji Alumni, as it happens. The older ones like the gentleman behind you have been in my service for many years. I assure you, there are plenty of people interested in this kind of security work, if you know where to look.”

“So you grew up like this, sure, but you still gotta know this isn’t normal, right? Normal people aren’t comfortable being babysat like this.”

“Ryuko, you know I have as much sympathy for normal people as anyone else, but you must admit that nothing about us is normal.”

“Don’t say shit like that,” Ryuko growled, “Makes you sound like the old you.” Satsuki just raised her eyebrows at that one, as if to say *that doesn't make it wrong though, I mean, look at you*. That would have cut too deep to say out loud though, and Satsuki knew it.

“Look, if you want me to apologize, I will admit I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry for that. But I won’t apologize for my security measures. If anything, it was irresponsible of me not to assign you all a security detail much earlier.”

“Fine, whatever,” Ryuko said with a tired looking smile. *Good*. Winning and argument against Satsuki was never as satisfying as it should have been, it always felt like she’d let herself be beaten. Ending one, on the other hand, was a relief either way.

“Well, that’s enough about that, then. Now, how are your classes going?”

“Oh well um, fine, probably.”

“Probably? What does that mean?”

“Nothing bad, don’t worry,” Ryuko held a hand up defensively. “I just won’t know for sure until after the midterms.”

“I see. Are you enjoying them, then?”

“Eh, most are pretty boring, honestly,” Ryuko said, and then quickly added, “But I’m having a good time here, besides that. Keeping busy and all that.”

“Hmm, I’m certainly aware of that,” Satsuki said with a smile. She had thought it would be her schedule that made it difficult to visit Ryuko and had felt quite guilty worrying that she might be lonely without any familiar faces. But as it turned out it was Ryuko who was even harder to pin down, running a regimented schedule just about every day. After classes wrapped up she was invariably partying or hanging out with friends until late in the evening, then she disappeared to patrol the city until dawn, then she slept ‘til noon, and then it was time to start the whole thing over again with classes. Even her roommate, a mousy girl who frankly seemed terrified of her, barely knew where she was at any time. That Satsuki had wound up going to her dorm in person just to try and track her down was telling enough. “And do your friends here treat you like a celebrity? The university has been doing its best to keep paparazzi off the campus, you know.”

“I appreciate that, I do. It seems to be working. Nah, but the folks I know here are really like anywhere else. Some people are too shy to even look at me, some don’t seem to care much and treat me like anyone else, and everything in between. I think the best is the ones who mostly treat me normally but, like, respect it just a little.”

“Is that so? Why’s that, I wonder?”

“Well, what I’ve seen is that if they don’t have at least a little respect that’s a sure sign that they’re just an ass. Like all these guys, they all think they’re gonna be the one to fuck the great Ryuko Matoi. Which, first of all: no, gross,” Ryuko paused so Satsuki could do one of her little hum-chuckles, “Second off, if they really wanted to seduce me, you’d think they’d try being nice for a change.”

“How troublesome. I’ve actually encountered men – and women – like that too, believe it or not.”

“Whaat? Seriously?”

“That’s what happens in high society sometimes. You saw it at Nonon’s Christmas party.”

“Well yeah but they were fuckin’ hammered there.”

“Certainly. But that’s far from rare for many of them.”

“Alright, alright, fair point. But still, I try to avoid that kind.”

“Of course. And you’re right that there’s nothing nice about it.”

“Oh you’re telling me, I knew this guy once who - you’ll never believe this –,” And Ryuko launched into a story about a guy who broke up with the girl he’d been seeing the same night that he started hitting on Ryuko, clearly just because he’d seen her when she entered the club. She played it off as a comically stupid scenario, but Satsuki could imagine that being treated like a prize to be pursued must have infuriated her. “I mean they’re not all total bad eggs,” She concluded, “It just seems like guys like that don’t actually like... well, being around people very much. But they do it anyway.”

“Mmm. Speaking of people who like just being around people, how are you getting along without Mako? I mean, I’m sure you miss her...”

“Yeah, I do miss her, but she’s only a phone call away, y’know. We talk all the time – she even came to visit a few weeks back. And I’ll get to see her when vacation starts up, so it’s not too bad.”

“No, I mean more not being *with* her anymore, you know. Because – you’re not – right?”

“Nah, I told you before Sats,” Ryuko waved a hand dismissively, “It’s not like that between us. It’s fine that we aren’t dating anymore because I still get to have her in my life. I don’t really sweat it that much, she’s happy and so I’m happy, y’know?” This was all true enough, but what Ryuko was far from willing to admit was that there were certain aspects she had found herself missing terribly. She hadn’t realized how much she relied on the sensations of sleeping next to a living creature to keep the silence at bay. It had overpowered her on the first night after Mako left for her college, and she’d laid eyes wide open staring at the ceiling for who knew how long, the emptiness crushing down like the pressure at the bottom of the ocean, until she slipped into unconsciousness from sheer exhaustion. How had she lived like this before? Were other people’s thoughts this quiet? It didn’t feel like she was even thinking them half the time, the same way that when you speak right after waking up you find yourself doubting if you really spoke at all minutes later. At home she’d brought Sukoyo’s cat (which had for some reason been given the name “chicken bone”) into her room, and the little noises its mouth made and the faint vibrations of the blankets as it purred did the trick. But at college she quickly found out she needed a solution or else she wouldn’t be sleeping at all. She’d found one sure, but it would’ve been nice if she didn’t have to worry about it.

“I guess I don’t really understand it, even now,” Satsuki said, not guessing the further depths behind what Ryuko’d said, “Maybe I never will, but that’s alright.”

“Well there’s lots of different ways – wait, you’ve never dated anyone, have you?”

“Come now, when would I have had the time for that?”

“Yes, well I think if you had you’d see that there’s lots of different ways to feel about someone even in a good relationship. Oh man, I really oughta take you down to a club sometime, get you some practice. Cuz, saying this as your sister, you’re a fuckin’ catch, Sats,” She added in the ‘as your sister’ part just as a hedge to hopefully make it less weird, make it clear she knew there was nothing *happening* between them. If it hadn’t been for Satsuki mentioning her own sexuality that one time in the woods, she wouldn’t have thought to do it. Or if it hadn’t been for this sneaking suspicion that she suspected what really went on in Ryuko’s head, somehow. She said it quietly, though.

“Oh, well um, thanks,” Satsuki said, coloring up just a little and looking down into her plate. Very non-Satsuki behaviors. “I think it’s safe to say I could use the practice.”

“Well then we’re gonna make that happen sometime. We’ll dress ya up in something I’d wear, make it a little less obvious it’s you so it’s not the whole “Queen of

Japan” thing which probably does you no favors. Do something with your hair too, not like there’s anything wrong with it – you’re killing the short hair look – but it’s very *you*.”

“Oh no. My hair’s the one thing you’re not touching, and that’s final.”

“Wha – c’mon why not?”

“See this shine? I’ve been working to keep it this way for years. A single hair product besides the finest homemade conditioner could ruin it.”

“Oh yeah, I kinda forgot that most people have to worry about that. My hair’s not made of normal hair stuff, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“Oh please, that bird’s nest hasn’t seen a single product in your life and you know it.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that Mako got conditioner for me! She even tried spiking it up once!”

“See, this is what I was getting at, how are you supposed to get by without her?”

“Okay, that’s a low blow. It might surprise you to know that I was actually the neat one.”

“Whatever you say, Ryuko,” Satsuki replied with a laugh, “Whatever you say.”

When they pulled up in front of Satsuki’s apartment building it was hard not to notice that the street was packed. Camera flashes were going off before the car even stopped rolling, and Ryuko peered out the window to see a wave of reporters charging in from all sides. Fortunately, security guards emerged from somewhere and interposed themselves, creating a ring of stony faced, black suited goons between the crowds and them. Satsuki sighed with an expression that told Ryuko this was all very normal. When they got out, it became apparent that the crowd extended much further than the reporters. A sea of wooden scissor blades and adoring, half-crazed eyes greeted her, filling the entire city block on both sides. Someone closer to the front shouted, “It’s Lady Ryuko!” and without warning the entire crowd exploded with a fearsome noise like a jet engine revving up.

“Lady Ryuko!” She heard someone shout. Even without her supercharged ears she would have picked up some particularly impassioned cries from the din.

“Mistress!”

“Savior!”

“Bless us, Mistress, we beg you!”

“She – She looked at me! Did you see?!” The adoring cultists surged forward, crushing the press and other bystanders forwards until the security guards were straining to keep them from spilling onto the car. Despite herself, Ryuko took a step back.

“What the hell! Did these freaks know I was coming?” She shouted over the din.

“No, they’re always camped out here! They think I’m your high priestess or something!” Someone tripped in the stampede, and suddenly one of their scissor blade signs was hurtling over the guards. Without thinking Ryuko snatched it out of the air, and this brief action seemed to drive the throngs even madder.

“Holy shit!” Ryuko dropped the sign, “This is fucking nuts! We gotta go!”

“Nothing to do but wait! They’ll get bored or we’ll get the police in to clear things up!”

“Fuck that!”

“What do you mean?” Satsuki asked, and Ryuko glanced over with her trademark fearsome smile.

“You wanna try something crazy?”

“What does that – Oh no.” Satsuki said bluntly as Ryuko hoisted her up bridal style. From where she was looking, gauging distance, it was clear where they were going.

“Your place is the whole top floor, right?”

“Yes, but Ryuko the building is seventy stories tall!”

“My record is 87, what’s your point?”

“... Fine, do it,” Satsuki growled. She would never had agreed under most circumstances, but Ryuko’s grip was as firm as would be expected of a superhuman. They would get to the top, that wasn’t a concern. That she was doing this in front of the cameras, on the other hand...

“Hup!” Ryuko grunted, and all the shouting of the cultists was drowned out by the blasting of the wind in her face. *So, this is what it’s like to move the way a hybrid does.* The crowd of cultists rapidly receded into red – and – black robed ants as they rose for a shocking length of time. Satsuki was hardly keeping track of time but it felt like minutes passed as they soared up towards the skyline. Despite the wind and the weightless feeling in her gut it seemed as though they weren’t even ascending, just drifting in the air. With each passing floor she could easily imagine them suddenly hurtling back downward to a messy impact on the street below; instead, they somehow found themselves way above the roof of the skyscraper before their descent began, and when it ended it was with the precise one-two click of Ryuko’s sneakers on a wide, smooth patio adorned with hedgerows, tables, and a pool.

“And that.” Ryuko said as she set Satsuki down on slightly shaky legs, “Is how I get around now. Whatcha think?”

“Well, it’s efficient, I’ll give you that,” Satsuki said as she got her footing and strolled over to the doors. Fortunately, they weren’t locked, and Soroi was there to greet her with a hug and a brush for her tousled hair.

“Front doors are just a waste of time to me now. I don’t think I’ve gotten in my dorm by the door once since move-in day. I’m pretty sure my roommate’s pissed at me for coming in through the window at five AM every day, but frankly I’d make more noise if I used the door anyway. Y’know I was thinking, if Shiro gets his way and in the future everyone’s a hybrid like me maybe one day they’re completely redo all the architecture and just get rid of doors entirely since everybody will just go in the windows.”

“I doubt it. It’s the easy route, and frankly, most people are lazy when they don’t have any reason not to be.”

“But that’s the thing! I’m not even winded - Hey, Soroi, what’s up? - ,” She interrupted herself as she followed Satsuki inside, “Now, let’s take a look at your sweet pad, eh?” Ryuko said, and from the main den she could already tell it would not disappoint. It was an airy white space that stretched three entire stories up, overlooked by a wide marble stairwell that swept up through the center to landings with doors to at least twenty separate bedrooms, as well as smaller lounges stocked with just as many plush white leather sofas as on the ground floor. The decoration had a unified design, clean and bright with a beachy white and blue color scheme and refined, modern trim and decor. “Damn, this place puts Nonon’s to shame!” She said, sauntering over to a TV screen easily as large as the entire floor space of the Mankanshoku’s kitchen and living room put together, “What, did they just drop an entire mansion on top of this skyscraper?”

“Hmm, more like a skyscraper was built under the mansion. And I do mean that, this was one of the many properties Ragyo had custom built - not that she ever actually stayed here, of course,” Satsuki spat contemptuously. “I’ve had the place redone to fit a more modest taste, as much as that was possible. Come, I’ll show you around.” The rest of the penthouse was no less sumptuous. The kitchens were extensive “- with me here so infrequently, it’s really more her penthouse than mine -” Satsuki said as she introduced the chef to Ryuko; the currently unoccupied master bedroom was almost as large as the main hall with a floor to ceiling window overlooking Tokyo bay “- quite a nice view now that Honoujji’s out of the way -”; the dining hall could seat thirty easily “-I don’t know when I’d ever use that-”; and there was even a cozy, out-of-the-way game den with a VR console set up although it had never been used “- you don’t want to know what *this* place used to be -”.

“And this is where I sleep when I’m here,” Satsuki said unceremoniously, opening the door to the final stop on their tour. All there was in the narrow chamber was a bed, dresser, and a desk. It was more a monk’s cell than a bedroom.

“Woow, fancy,” Ryuko said, turning back down to the main lounge, “Geez, you took the smallest room here, huh?”

“Indeed. I do not stay in downtown Tokyo unless I am needed here for work – I’ve been living in the gardener’s house on the Kiryuin Manor’s ground – so I have no need for distractions when I’m here.”

“So why’d you even keep this place then? I mean, you already got rid of the manor.”

“I found a use for the manor, not sold it. I’ve sold off many of the other properties I inherited, but this one I’ve still found serviceable for entertaining foreign dignitaries. It still does go unused though, most of the time. But I have an idea for that.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

“Do you want it?”

“Wha – seriously? What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Well, live here, if you want. When you’re out of your current dorm, of course. The commute would hardly be a problem for you, I’m sure.”

“I mean sure but I don’t know what I’d do with all this either,” Ryuko flopped on one of the couches in a nook by the giant TV, “I mean, if I thought I needed a giant-ass penthouse I’d have asked for one a long time ago.”

“Oh, I’m sure you could think of something to do here,” Satsuki said, smiling as she sat down across from her. Ryuko made a shrug as if to say *I don’t know what you mean*. “Well, don’t be coy with me, I’m quite aware how you spend your weekends.”

“Oh are you now? I kinda thought you’d nag about it, not offer me a whole penthouse to party in.”

“It’s not interrupting your schoolwork is it?”

“No?”

“Then I don’t see any issue. It might be nice to see this place filled with people.”

“Alright, fine, if you insist. But you don’t have to keep giving me shit, it’s getting to be a bit much.”

“This isn’t a gift, really. Our property is as much yours as it mine. I’m just suggesting that you make better use of what you already own.”

“Well, when you put it like that, I can see myself using it occasionally. And maybe I will move in next semester, who knows. If you just want me to use it throw ragers, that I can totally arrange though,” Ryuko said with a grin. “But you have to come, okay? And drag Houka and the guys out of their hole too.”

“I never said you had to. But you do have my permission. As for my attendance, I really can’t make any promises.”

“Aw c’mon. If I’m gonna move in with you it’s only fair you hang out with me.”

“But you won’t be moving in with me,” Satsuki said quickly *Is that what I just asked her to do?* “More like I’ll be your houseguest every once in a while.”

“Alright, fine, fine, you can come if you want. Oh, y’know I’m definitely gonna bring Mataro over here sometime. He’ll lose his shit when he sees the VR rig you’ve got.”

“He sure loves those games, doesn’t he?”

“Well if you ever tried them you’d love ‘em too. Actually, maybe not. You’ve done way cooler shit in real life. But still at least he’s not a junkie like some of his friends.”

“They aren’t allowed here, by the way. His friends, I mean. Did you see that video he posted of them smashing all those old TVs?”

“I thought that was pretty funny! When the big guy put one on his head and started running around?” She said with a chuckle, “They’re total idiots, but you gotta admit they know comedy.”

“Well sure, but do you really want to be cleaning up after them? These might be the only couches in the world that have never had crumbs in them, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Alright, fair enough. I don’t really want those twerps running around anyway.”

“No, you don’t. In fact I’m kind of surprised you’re okay with them at all. Aren’t they a bad influence on him?”

“Oh please, Mataro’s been dealing with bad influences all his life. And since when’s that my job anyway?”

“Well, he is your protégé now, so to speak.”

“Uhh, I don’t think so. Where’d you get that idea from?”

“You must have noticed how much he admires you, and –,” Satsuki paused as Ryuko’s phone started ringing. She stood up as she pulled it from her pocket.

“Sorry Sats, I gotta take this. We will finish that topic though,” Satsuki nodded, and Ryuko started pacing the hall as she answered, “Hey babe, what’s up?”

Satsuki did a double-take, her heart skipping a beat for no perceivable reason.

“Nah, I’m off campus for a while, sorry, I woulda told you but I thought you were in class... Cancelled? Nice... Well I do hate to disappoint you but I probably won’t be back for a little while... Yeah, might as well... No, but guess who I’m hanging out with?... No, no, no it’s nobody you’ve met... Nah, not Mako either. Give up?... It’s Satsuki!... Yes, *the* Satsuki Kiryuin!” Satsuki heard an excited squeal from the other side of the line, “Yeah, we’re checkin’ out this kickass penthouse she’s got – yeah I’m definitely gonna drag you up here

sometime, this place has everything... Oh yeah, she's totally chill with it, she basically asked if I'd want to move in here... I haven't decided, maybe you can help me make up my mind, huh?... Yes, you can help me, I wanna know what you think... I really do!... What? No, of course not, I told you her and I are best friends now, er, sisters, y'know?... No, I totally think you should meet her... No! She's not, don't be ridiculous... Oho you'd like that, would you? You've got a real active imagination sometimes, you know that?... A-alright, but you probably shouldn't talk like that, she might overhear... Yeah, she's in the room right now actually, wanna say hello? Yo Sats! Say hey to Haruka!" She pressed the speaker button and held the phone up, revealing a contact photo of a scrawny woman with long brown hair pulled up in a messy bun, the kind of eyes that looked perpetually tired, and a demure smile that Satsuki had to admit was simply adorable.

"Hello Haruka!" She said, trying to make her voice smile through the microphone, "It's very nice to meet you!"

"Oh w-wow, that really is you Lady Satsuki! I'm so – It's very nice to meet you too," The voice on the other side was soft and sweet and clearly starstruck.

"I must admit I'm surprised. Ryuko hadn't told me she got herself a girlfriend."

"Oh, well um that's alright," Satsuki had meant it as a gentle joke at Ryuko's expense, the sort she'd expected a nagging girlfriend would find humor in. Evidently it hadn't landed. Ryuko's glare told her she hadn't appreciated it either. *Throwing her in hot water, I guess. Very smooth.*

"Well, you're more than welcome to come by sometime, I'd love to meet you in person!"

"I-I'm honored, you're too kind Lady Satsuki."

"Please, call me Satsuki. I don't like titles much." At this point, with much further deference, Haruka said her goodbyes and Ryuko took the conversation back again. They chatted for a little while longer, planning out their evening and gossiping, while Satsuki waited in patient idleness. *So she really is over me. That's good, She thought sadly. There was a pang of jealousy there, why was that? Oh, of course. Ryuko's told me things about herself she never told anyone else. Except maybe this Haruka. But that's selfish of me. Without me she wouldn't have been The Girl who Saved the World, my "training" saw to that, and she wouldn't have learned how to run her own life after that if it weren't for me either, but didn't I do that so she could go off into the world on her own, and isn't that exactly what she's done? Then I can dismiss that feeling; it's foolish of me to want her all to myself, and even if she has a girlfriend that doesn't stop us being sisters.*

"Alright, sorry about that, I'm back," Ryuko said as she hung up. "Y'know, I haven't decided if I'll move in here, but I'll definitely be stashing Osuzumebachi (this was the name she'd given her motorcycle, after the Japanese giant hornet on account of the stinger-like curve of its body) in the garage if that's alright. You ever heard the story of what I have to do with her so she doesn't get swiped at school?"

“Your girlfriend seems very nice,” Satsuki changed the topic pointedly, with a nod of her head.

“Aha yeah, she is. She’s great. I’m glad you like her so far,” Ryuko said awkwardly, lifting an arm behind her head as she sat down, “I probably ought to have told you sooner, I guess. But I didn’t want to before we were official, y’know?”

“I see, I think. So, how long ago was that then?”

“Well, it’s hard to say, really. She’s basically been living in my room for almost a month now, but we only talked about it last week. So... somewhere in there, I guess.”

“That’s almost the whole time you’ve been here so far. Lucky you, to find her so soon, I suppose.” Satsuki meant that too, she felt a glow of pride and envy imagining Ryuko bumping up against this young woman at some bar or party, hitting it off instantly, going home together and that being that. *It’s no surprise. Who wouldn’t love her?*

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Ryuko said, “You remember what I was saying before about people who all think they’re gonna be the one to fuck me? Well, she’s the one who won – in a good way though, don’t worry.”

“I don’t think I get it. How can that be in a good way?”

“Well, I’d say it’s more like she’d seen all about me in the news; she’d already made up her mind about me, y’know?”

“So she’s dating her celebrity crush?”

“Well, it sounds bad when you say it *that* way,” *Not as bad as the reality though*, Ryuko thought with guilt hanging heavy in her chest, resolving that she wouldn’t tell Satsuki she was dating a woman who seemed to really believe in her divinity. The lecture she’d get for that one didn’t bear thinking about. She both liked and needed Haruka too much to feel bad about that. “Nah, you’ll meet her, and you’ll see it’s good.”

“I never said it was bad. I’m sure you’re lots of women’s celebrity crush, you know. It’s just a matter of probability that you met one. It must make her very happy.”

“Oh, I hope she’s happy,” Ryuko said breathily, and Satsuki’s brows curved at the genuine worry in Ryuko’s voice.

“You sell yourself too short. I’m sure you’re a great girlfriend.”

“Thanks, but all I can do is try,” Ryuko said, and she meant it. But where Satsuki imagined planning romantic dates and remembering each other’s favorite foods, she had something quite different in mind. All she could do was try to really love Haruka the way she was loved in return, try to get her to treat her like a normal person, not some sort of Goddess. Try not to, when they were drifting off in the small hours of the morning (Haruka had completely rescheduled her day so that she could be there when Ryuko needed her to help fall asleep), imagine what it would feel like if it were Satsuki there instead.

In which Nonon learns some hard lessons

She needed to get even stronger, somehow. Ryuko had come to that conclusion not long after seeing the press conference assassination attempt that Satsuki narrowly survived. She wouldn't be so lucky forever, but Ryuko was an expert at making her own luck and had learned that it paid to be prepared. If she could be there for Satsuki next time, she would be. It wasn't the raw physical strength *per se* she actually wanted – she hadn't found a thing she couldn't lift or punch yet – where she was lacking was speed and reaction time. Patrolling in Tokyo only made that even more apparent. Among the megacity's endless skyscrapers there were so many people in need, an overwhelming number assailing her senses constantly. She was comfortable with the knowledge that she would never save everyone, she wouldn't have even be able to patrol Kanagawa without a mental breakdown if she weren't. But if she were only a little faster, she could save another - even if it were just one more person a night. And then there were the times when she got there too late. She never wanted to see that look on another person's face again, that look that said, *I put my trust in you, and now look what's happened*. Maybe it was her fault, maybe people were becoming too dependent on her, who knew? Who cared? Such worries wouldn't deter her.

And on top of all that, she really wanted to fly again.

Ragyo had claimed her power of flight came from giving herself over to the life fibers, but Ryuko didn't buy it. She was sure she could do it too if only there were enough life fibers woven together inside her, and that was something she could make happen.

And so she found herself parking Osuzumebachi in front of the Research Complex Visitor Center with a newfound determination. She had to do it, not just for Satsuki's sake, and there was a simple sort of solace in that. Like the old days – don't think, just act. It was far more comforting than any amount of fretting over her humanity, or lack thereof. Questions of whether she wanted this obligation were far from Ryuko's mind as she descended into the secret lab's depths, idly chatting with Aikuro.

"What fuck are you doing here?" A shrill shout suddenly distracted her as the doors opened, and she jerked her head around to see Nonon reclined across a couch, bowl of yogurt in her hand and snarl on her face.

"I could ask you the same question, pint size!" Ryuko shot back.

"Oh joy, here we go," Aikuro strolled off towards the test chambers with a roll of his eyes.

"No, moron, you couldn't because unlike some of us I have actual important business here!"

"Really? Because you look like you're just eating... what is that, Kiwi yogurt? Ew, the fuck's wrong with you?"

“Shut up! It’s a perfectly good flavor!” Nonon could tell Ryuko had the upper hand, so she sat up with a smug little smile and pulled her knees up to her chest. Looking cute was a surefire way to disarm Ryuko, “Now that I think of it, I should’ve known you were coming when they started hiding all the glass test tubes and shit.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh my god, do you have rocks for brains or something? You’re world famous for wrecking shit!”

“Am not! Er, ok, well, if I weren’t, we’d all be dead but if that’s where you wanna go with that one that’s pretty weird dude.”

“Fine then, how about this: I’m sure you think it’s cool and all that you get to help the guys with their science project, but it’s not. I, for instance, am not just here to hang out and get x-rayed.”

“Cool,” Ryuko said, standing with her arms crossed while Nonon stared angry pink daggers into her.

“Well, aren’t you gonna ask what I’m here for?”

“Nah, not my business. Boy, you’d think Aikuro’d be back by now.”

“It’s the Kamui, idiot! I’m training to wear Kamui Saiban!”

“Cool.”

“Oh shut up, I know it pisses you off.”

“Hah! And why would that be?”

“Oh, maybe because you’re worried I’ll be a better Kamui wearer than you.”

“I *very* much doubt that.”

“I dunno,” Nonon singsonged in a way that drove her shrill, scratchy voice deep into Ryuko’s eardrums, “I think I’ve got a cha-ance.”

“Nah sis, see I never told Satsuki this because I didn’t wanna burst her bubble, but there’s no way a shrimp like you could have what it takes to wear a Kamui. Heh, even if you managed to synchronize, you’d never have the strength to get it to move. You’ll go totally stiff like that Ogure chick.”

“Oh please like you ever trained! I’ve been going for months now so I think I’m good. And once, I do synchronize – well – you know you never learned how to fight properly.”

“I beat you.”

“With Kamui deflection bullshit! No, you set us down to some good old-fashioned swordplay and we’ll see who comes out on top.”

“Seriously? Didn’t think you’d have the balls. But what the hell, you’re on,” Ryuko rolled up her sleeves with a fearsome grin. It wasn’t that she was really thrilled about the opportunity to beat the crap out of Nonon, but she was just so fun to antagonize. And something about her just really got on Ryuko’s nerves sometimes - it wasn’t even just the constant ribbing. Still, she was almost remorseful at the idea that schooling her might shut her up for good. But then, on the other hand, she’d been training with Tsumugu for almost a year now, and if Nonon was good enough this could be a chance to practice against a different fighting style. “I’ll kick your ass right now!”

“No, you’ll wait to get *your* ass handed to you until I’m done enjoying my kiwi yogurt, thank you very much.”

“Fuck that, y’know I’ve got shit to do too -,”

“Ladies, that’s quite enough,” Houka suddenly cut in, emerging from storage with Shiro, “You’re welcome to beat each other up as much as you want, but do it on your own time, please. And if you would, do confine your shouting to the test chambers – these hallways produce quite excessive echoes.”

“Oh hey Houka, Shiro, what’s up?”

“Same old, same old. Well, except your friend here has moved in with us for Kamui reasons, as I believe you were discussing.”

“Sounds about right.”

“It’s been a while, Ryuko. Not still mad at me, I hope?” Shiro asked with a smile.

“What? Nah, I had a good long talk with our Nudist Beach boys about that, we’re cool. You’re still insane though. It’s just school’s been keeping me busy is all.”

“Well, that’s all for the best then. And how is it going, if I may ask?”

“Alright, pretty fun actually, dunno why you guys dropped out. Still don’t know what I’m gonna study or nothin’, but I’m not failing anything which is good. I got a girlfriend too, so that’s cool.”

“*You* got a girlfriend?” Nonon cut in incredulously.

“Now, now Nonon,” Houka began.

“Nonon I don’t know what you even think that’s supposed to mean.”

“Figure it out, or you can phone a friend if you really are that dumb,” Nonon pushed off the couch and hastened over to put her half-finished yogurt back in the fridge, “Well, I guess it’s time I got back too it. The thought of you and some poor girl, well, I’ve lost my appetite. Even if you are probably making her up.”

“Hey, fuck you too!” Ryuko shouted at Nonon’s back as she skipped off to the test chambers, “I’ve got pull, bitch! I’ve got plenty of pull!” Once she was gone Ryuko turned back to Houka and Shiro with a laugh, “Well, my closing remarks weren’t the best, but I got in a few good ones here and there.”

“Is this some kind of game then, between you two?”

“Not at all! Can’t show any weakness!” Ryuko said. *Well, it kinda is like a game though, at least for me. If Nonon really does hate my guts though, I definitely don’t make things any better.*

“Quite,” Houka said tersely, “Well, now that she’s out of the way, what brings you down here?”

“I wanna try absorbing more life fibers,” Ryuko said simply.

“Really?” Houka and Shiro’s faces, by habit calm and composed, registered shock much less than most. Ryuko could tell they hadn’t expected this though and wondered if their deadpan expressions were something that had rubbed off on them from Satsuki or just how they’d always been.

“Well, yeah. C’mon, I know you want to see what’ll happen.”

“I think we’re just surprised by the sudden change in heart. I mean, I am,” Shiro nodded in agreement.

“Well, I’ve been thinking, if it does make my powers better, I might as well right? After all, I do use ‘em pretty often.”

“I see,” Houka had pulled out his phone and was quickly scrolling through something, “Well, I *would* like a chance to observe this phenomenon. Shiro?”

“Oh yes, definitely. We want to make sure we’re making Saiban so it has the absorption capability, after all. We can begin now, if you’re ready.”

“So, do I just take the lid off or what?” Ryuko said, leaping up onto the metal top of one of the life fiber storage pods, some fifteen feet off the ground. Houka and Shiro looked up from the desk they’d pulled over, which they’d covered with computers and odd little scanner-antennae in a haphazard manner.

“If you want, but you won’t be able to put it back on. You should be able to absorb everything in here, though, so go for it.”

“Really? Er, how much of the stuff is in here?”

“Oh, several thousand yards.”

“Whereas you have, if our records from your last visit are accurate, somewhere over one million yards inside you,” Shiro added, “This container holds less than 1% of your current life fiber content.”

“Okay, that can’t be right! How do they all fit inside me then?”

“They’re infinitely thin, remember? In theory there should be no limit to how many a vessel such as yourself or a Kamui can hold.”

“Oh yeah, you did say that, didn’t you,” Ryuko said, idling trying to find a good grip on the lid, which wasn’t easy because it was perfect dome, “So what, will this make me about 1% more powerful?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Power from life fibers doesn’t appear to be nearly that linear, but there’s only one way to find out.”

“Right, you guys ready?”

“One moment,” Houka said with an extended finger, his mouth hidden by the collar of his lab coat. There was a video-gamey pinging noise from one of the sensors, and he gave a thumbs up. “Alright, you may begin.”

Ryuko tightened her grip on the smooth metal of the pod’s plug. Her fingers dug into the metal with a faint screeching noise. She couldn’t see the life fibers inside her pod from this vantage point, but the drifting strands across the room looked calm and peaceful. The cool blue light that suffused the room might have had something to do with that, though. *Am I really gonna do this? Yeah, fuck it, I guess I am. Besides, these fibers will actually be less of a threat once I’ve absorbed them.* The lid slid up with a rubbery “thoop”, and Ryuko popped off the pod, grabbing the smooth surface of the glass rim and planting her soles on the side like a monkey, releasing the lid gently. It slammed into the concrete floor with a loud gong noise as Ryuko hoisted herself back up. The fibers recoiled like eels at the exposure to the open air, but they didn’t seem to mind Ryuko’s hand as it plunged in. Shiro hadn’t been kidding when he said that the pale blue solution was electrified – dozens of tiny blue-white whips of electricity flicked off the surface and adhered to her arm, crawling across her skin as though she were a tesla coil. Her hair stood on end and she felt a dull tingling racing across her body, but whatever pain it caused wasn’t strong enough to register to her. She wrapped a fist around one of the larger cords; as expected, it compressed to less than nothing in her grasp, a mess of tendrils extended from her hand and drifted lazily.

“Ok, here goes,” She pulled the end of the strand out of the water, held it up to her red streak, and... *Nothing.* An uncomfortable pause passed as her face contorted in frustration and a faint growl passed through pursed lips.

“Um,” Houka said, “It’s not working?”

“Obviously,” Shiro gave him a gentle elbow in the ribs, then turned back to Ryuko, “perhaps there’s some conscious method to it that you aren’t currently using, some manner of focusing on it? Can you remember any difference between your current mindset and when you accidentally absorbed that one strand last time?”

“Hmm, maybe, let’s see. Well, I was pretty pissed at you guys then, but I’m kinda annoyed right now and I feel like getting angrier isn’t going to do it.”

“Well, why don’t you try for a little longer. There’s no rush, they won’t try to escape or anything.”

“Alright,” Ryuko said, and turned her attention back to the life fibers. They reminded her of a sea anemone, and she remembered what she’d heard about the fibers appearing to grow or shrink so that they stayed the same size no matter how near they were to one’s eyes. She lifted the frayed end of the cord all the way up so that it was right in front of her eyes, intertwining with her red streak. Still nothing. *Dammit, I guess this is a total bust. What the hell, maybe this is a sign that it was a stupid idea.* Still, she kept staring at the fibers for a moment longer, admiring their strangeness. Maybe the strangest part was how the individual strands that made up the cord funneled into her balled up fist, almost like liquid. After maybe a minute, she felt something odd. A faint breeze played across her thumb, right up by the end of the cord. *What the hell? Is there like a loose thread tickling me or something?* She lifted her free hand to brush at it. The moment it made contact with the tendrils, another much stronger feeling took over. Cool, clear spring water poured in through her forehead.

“Whoa!” Shiro shouted, and Ryuko snapped open her eyes with a startled gasp. When had she closed them? More importantly, she hadn’t moved her other hand at all, and if she had she would’ve lost her grip and fallen. And more important even than that, the cord of life fibers had changed. There was no longer any division between it and her red streak. One continuous band flowed from the tank to her hairline, chugging along steadily, maybe an inch or two disappearing into her each second “How did you do that?” Ryuko dropped down from the pod and stood looking up at the fibers. They folded along the rim of the glass, but kept on coming even when pulled flat like taffy. The refreshing sensation lighting up Ryuko’s scalp didn’t stop either. Every hair was vibrating in place, suffusing her with a sensation like a concentrated shot of caffeine.

“Well, that was nuts. But hey, I think you were right. All I had to do was focus.”

“You did more than that,” Houka said, “Nervous system scanners indicate that you briefly entered some sort of meditative state that allowed you to interact with the fibers.”

“Sure, I guess. Call it what you want, but it was pretty fucking weird,” Ryuko said casually. Inwardly, however, she was still reeling. Slipping into that state had been too easy, too relaxing, too out of her conscious control. It didn’t sit right. *Should’ve known the things would try and hypnotize me. I feel like I’m back to normal now, but what if I’m not?*

“Would it be possible for you to describe the experience?” Shiro asked, notebook in hand. Ryuko did her best to tell it exactly as she remembered, but the “third hand” feeling stopped her up a bit. It was hard to describe how exactly it had worked, especially when she didn’t remember it correctly herself. It did feel familiar to what had happened when she absorbed that one life fiber, as well as when she’d absorbed all the life fibers from the Honoujji Defcon System, but she’d been *sure* she’d be using her real hand. At least, she was sure she’d been trying to use it. Obviously, she had some kind of incorporeal ability to

interact with the life fibers, but how had she activated it? She had no idea, and when she told Houka and Shiro as much they scrunched up their faces.

“Well, there’s one way to find out: do it again. See if you can disconnect yourself and then reconnect, or speed up absorbing this pod and we can get you another,” Houka suggested.

“Alright, I’ll give it a shot, but I don’t know how to do that. Oh, and that’s another thing, I don’t know how to make it go faster either.”

“Well, I suggest you figure it out, because at your current rate you’ll be here until at least nine o’clock before it’s all gone.”

“Wha-are you serious?” Ryuko sputtered, but she knew he was right. It was easy to see that the rate wasn’t remotely fast enough compared to how many life fibers were left floating in their solution. But she could figure out a way, she was sure. She’d absorbed way more from the Honoujji Defcon System in just an instant, but then the adrenaline from fighting it probably had something to do with that. “Well, I guess I’d better figure something out, because I’ve gotta get back downtown by five.”

The next half hour or so consisted of Ryuko attempting to replicate her prior feats of absorption. The first thing that she had to master was making the incorporeal “third hand” come back. This took her a while to figure out since it seemed to come most easily when she wasn’t looking for it. The first time she felt it while in a totally normal state of consciousness was actually in the middle of a conversation about college; it slipped away then, but the next time it came back she cut herself off mid-sentence and quickly slashed a hand through the fibers flowing into her hair. The invisible karate chop cleanly intersected them, and those left on her side quickly swam up through her hair and out of sight. Shiro and Houka scribbled down notes as the cord seemingly severed itself. After that it wasn’t nearly as difficult to figure out how to replicate the feat, reattaching and severing the cord multiple times so that the scanners could get a good reading on it. Who knew what they were doing, but her scientist friends seemed very excited at the results that were pouring in through the monitor.

“Alright, this is getting better,” Ryuko said when she tried grabbing the life fibers and found that she could, dragging them around through the air in experimental loops, eyes wide open. She still couldn’t figure out how to control it without picturing herself using her real arm, so for the moment her left arm hung limp and numb at her side. But then, if this was going so well maybe that would get better with practice. She even allowed herself a satisfied chuckle, noticing that while she did feel quite lightheaded, she didn’t *seem* to be seeing anything that wasn’t really happening. “Damn, am I good at this or what? Er, guys?”

“Without any further data there’s no way to tell if you are refining this ability at an prodigal rate or a completely average one,” Shiro said without looking up from his screens.

“Something fun going on over here?” Ryuko said, walking over to look along with them, fibers trailing after her. But there was no way she was going to get anything out of the impenetrable wall of data scrolling across the computers, a monochromatic jumble of numbers with no labels and no clear pattern. “Oh, nevermind.”

“This one is showing the changes in your hair’s structure, to see what the life fiber absorption looks like on a molecular level. Well, not exactly molecular, they don’t have molecules, but you get the idea. Very small. And this monitor is showing a number of different readings about the life fibers themselves. We’re testing a hypothesis that the individual fibers have a sort of attraction to being absorbed, as if they *want* to be integrated into a larger consciousness,” Houka explained

“Oh yeah, that sort of make sense. It feels like that might be true, actually.”

“If we can prove it, that would go a long way to figuring out what life fibers are: if they’re like single cells with no self-awareness until you put them together in the right arrangement, or if each individual one is capable of thought on some level.”

“I always assumed they were able to think. I mean, I kinda thought there was some kinda ‘hive-mind’ bullshit going on.”

“I see,” Shiro started scribbling down notes, “Do you have any specific examples of this?” He looked up very seriously, clearly expecting a detailed analysis.

“I dunno, geez, look how ‘bout this if I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. In that case though can you please return to your place, so the scanners can see you.”

“Y’know, I was wondering about something else,” Ryuko said as she complied, “You said before that there was no limit to what I could absorb. But then Senketsu, well, when he died... I think he said that Shinra Koketsu was too much for him. So – a-and I know you weren’t there, and all that – but what do you make of that?”

“Well, I -,”

“- And I’m not just saying this for the shoulda-woulda-coulda or whatever, ok? You want the new Kamui to absorb life-fibers, so you can power it up, and it would suck if you accidentally killed it by going too far.”

“Well, I’m going to stand by what I said before,” Shiro continued, “More likely it’s something specific to the unique powers that Kamui had, maybe Senketsu didn’t have any way to contain the energy from the ‘Absolute Domination’ power.”

“Remember when I tried to collect data on Shinra Koketsu?” Houka addressed Shiro, who responded with a nod, “It shorted out my Goku Uniform right out. That thing was definitely not normal.”

“No, and we won’t be trying to make another, no use for it. And even if it wasn’t that, Shinra Koketsu had an absurd amount of life fibers – more than a billion, enough to go from the earth to the moon and back if you stretched it all the way out. I don’t think we’ll ever try using that much ever again – in fact that’s more than -,”

“-Oh, got it!” Ryuko interrupted him suddenly, and with one of those odd keening, wind-whipping noises that they sometimes made all the life fibers left in the pod suddenly pulsed brilliant crimson and mobilized. Whipping like flames, the writhed all throughout Ryuko’s hair, bathing her face in a glittering veil. And, as quickly as they’d sprung up, they were gone, siphoned off into Ryuko. She let out a ticklish giggle as the boys scrolled across their data furiously.

“I don’t understand it, you clearly figured it out, but there was no significant change in any of the readings. What did you do?” Shiro asked.

“Well, it’s funny,” Ryuko chuckled, face flush as though she’d been running, “All I did was imagine a fishing rod instead of a hand, and I could just... reel ‘em in, I guess.”

“That’s... Ok, sure. And how do you feel now?”

“Great,” Ryuko said emphatically. Moving her left arm for the first time in minutes, she felt a sensation like firecrackers soaring through its muscles, dispelling the pins-and-needles and leaving behind a limbered relaxation. And a coiled spring tension that rippled throughout her body. Without a word of warning she sprung off the floor in a blur of motion, zipping up to the ceiling where she turned and kicked back off, landing on the ground with a grin. She was still in complete control. All doubts were dispelled, so long as she didn’t hit whatever upper limit might exist, she was certain there wasn’t any danger. But... her face fell as she realized: “Eh, it doesn’t feel much different than before. One percent isn’t enough to make a meaningful difference, I guess.”

“Well, we do have more,” Houka said with a sly smile. Ryuko was usually such a recalcitrant test subject, it was nice to see her enthusiastic for a change.

“You read my mind.”

“Homey,” Ryuko snarked as she strolled out onto the floor of the test chamber that Nonon had set up as a makeshift gym. Aside from all the exercise equipment scattered around and a simple fighting ring constructed from smooth wooden floor panels and racks of wooden practice weapons, it was an exact replica of the stark chamber where Ryuko had been experimented on last time she’d visited. *Amazing, there’s five of them basically living here now, they could buy whatever they want to spruce things up, and the place still looks like a fuckin jail.* She shouted that thought over to Nonon but got no response. Between the pounding of the treadmill and electronic music so loud it bled out through her headphones, she didn’t even notice that Ryuko had come in until she stepped up in front of the treadmill, tracing a lazy finger along the controls. Nonon’s eyes went wide as she pressed the “speed up” button with a mischievous smirk.

“No no no,” Nonon muttered urgently, hurrying to mash the “slow down” button in response, “No no no no no GODDAMMIT!” She threw her hands up and leapt off the treadmill, getting up in Ryuko’s face, “The fuck is your problem!”

“What?” Ryuko threw up her hands as if she didn’t know what Nonon was talking about, but her teasing smile said otherwise, “I thought you said I should drop by and we’d settle things the old-fashioned way? Or were you not serious about that?”

“Hah! I thought *you* weren’t serious about that. Eh what the hell, I’m warmed up, I’ll school your ass right now. Get ready.”

“I am,” Ryuko shouted from the fighting ring, already holding a bamboo shinai. The moment Nonon agreed to fight Ryuko had dashed over faster than the human eye could process, plenty fast enough to produce a rush of wind that nearly knocked Nonon’s headphones off her head altogether. It had the intended effect, Nonon looked terrified. “You coming?”

“ ‘You coming?’ Yeah yeah, you think you’re so cool, don’t you?” Nonon snarked as she walked over to the weapon rack, looking like she expected Ryuko to jump on her the moment she turned her back, “Er, you are gonna keep yourself down to human levels, right?”

“Mostly human, yeah, otherwise what’s the point?” Ryuko said as Nonon chose a weapon, “Quarterstaff, huh? Kinda like your marching stick.”

“You mean baton, you dunce? You sure you’re holding your sword the right way?”

“Holy shit that thing’s taller than you!” Ryuko exclaimed with a burst of laughter. That was probably normal for a quarterstaff, actually, but Nonon seemed annoyed by it anyway. With a huff, she took her place across from Ryuko, “Well, you ready to go?”

“You know it,” Nonon said, but she barely managed to block Ryuko’s first overhead swing as she hurtled towards her. From that point on they were in full motion. Nonon danced around on spritely little feet, dodging Ryuko’s slices with exaggerated, dancelike motions. She was definitely better with the quarterstaff than Tsumugu was, twirling it around and throwing in attacks with both ends in quick succession. Ryuko might have even left her a few openings with her reaction speed down to human levels, if it weren’t for what she’d learned with Tsumugu. Only once she’d actually tried fighting without her hybrid advantage did she realize she’d been relying on her speed and strength to make up for a fighting style that mostly consisted of swinging in wide, brutal arcs with no regard for anything but battering her opponent. That must’ve been why she never even came close to beating Satsuki. But now the Shinai was loose in her hand, moving only as much as it needed to. If she had been frustrated when Tsumugu first instructed her to hold back, now it was all paying off as she met Nonon’s dancing quarterstaff strike for graceful strike. But as many times as their weapons met, neither managed to land a hit for ten minutes before they skidded apart. Nonon’s skin was beaded with sweat by now, having played defense for most of their fight, but there was a grim sort of smile on her face. She had come *very* close to hitting Ryuko. Ryuko too was smiling despite herself.

“You have gotten better,” Nonon said as she resumed her ready position.

“You’re no slouch either,” Ryuko replied.

“Thanks. Ready for round two?”

“Lemme just grab a new Shinai,” Ryuko said, pointing to the noticeable dent forming in the middle of hers, Nonon nodded, but when Ryuko came back she’d instead was instead carrying a bokken: a slightly curved wooden weapon more along the lines of what she was comfortable with. She like the way the opponent’s weapon could slide off it at the right angle, leaving them wide open.

“Hey, dontcha think that’s a little too heavy?”

“You’re using a quarterstaff.”

“Yeah well you won’t get hurt by it.”

“Well neither will you if you don’t get hit.”

“You’re fucking impossible. If you break my ribs and put me out of commission Satsuki’s gonna tear you a new one.”

“You think?”

“Duh, I’m her top investment right now. You must understand that my being ready for my Kamui is the number one priority now, right?”

“Is it?” An idea was forming in Ryuko’s head, “Well if that’s the case this is all wrong.”

“Uh,” Nonon looked around, “What do you mean?”

“Take off your clothes.”

“W-what? Argh, what the fuck is wrong with you!” Nonon’s face contorted with sudden fury and she instinctively threw an arm over he chest. Ryuko resisted the urge to laugh and stared at her unflinchingly.

“You wanna learn how to wear a Kamui properly? This is important.”

“Yeah right!”

“Seriously? After everything we went through you still aren’t comfortable with nudity?”

“Not around you, ya pervert!” Nonon shouted with a waving fist, “I’m not giving you anything to fuckin’ ogle.”

“Oh right, like you’ve got anything to see. I dated Mako, y’know, Mako?” She waved across her chest to indicate the disparity in curvaceousness.

“Fuck you.”

“Ah geez, alright look I’ll do it too,” Ryuko put down the bokken and started tugging off her t-shirt, despite protests from Nonon, “Remember how embarrassed I was

when I first put on Senketsu? If you think it's gonna be any better for you you're mistaken, unless you can prove you're comfortable getting naked."

"And why's that?"

"I really gotta lay it all out for you? C'mon you were there."

"Yeah, you do, if you're asking me to undress in front of you."

"Alright, fine," Ryuko said with a huffy sigh as she continued to undress, "Look, I can't prepare you for what it's like to have a Kamui in your head, but I can prepare you for what it's like to have one on your body. When you synchronize with a Kamui, you are naked, *it is* your skin. Unless you can see it that way, you'll never be able to draw even half of its full power out. It's totally different from a goku uniform. So, take your clothes off."

"Seriously? Alright fine, fine I'll do it," Nonon said, and finally caved and began removing her exercise outfit. Ryuko couldn't help but laugh inwardly at how much of a fight she'd put up, despite already wearing such form fitting clothing. But at the same time, she couldn't help but notice that she did show significant improvement in muscle tone from back at Honoujji, especially in the abs and thighs. *Lotta core strength for such a tiny girl. Makes sense she moves around so much while fighting. Maybe she is taking this seriously, after all.*

"Underwear too. You don't get to keep that when you transform," Nonon swore under her breath, but complied. In short order they were both fully nude and ready, although Ryuko could see the goosebumps on Nonon's skin, the tension in her shoulders. "*Now* I'll show you a thing or two about wearing a Kamui."

Ryuko began the second round with the same furious full-frontal assault as last time, and they were off again. Nonon held her own but was still on defense, backpedaling and scooting around Ryuko, hands trembling each time she blocked Ryuko's bokken – a much heavier weapon than the shinai. Ryuko pressed her advantage; Nonon was good enough that she didn't deserve a handicap, and sooner or later there would be an opening. Nonon was starting to get less creative with her dodges, and reusing the same moves made her predictable. Ryuko noticed that she wasn't using one of her better tricks – dropping flat on her back and essentially breakdancing back to standing to avoid a mid-body slice – clearly because the move would've been too racy without any underwear. That was a disadvantage Ryuko could capitalize on. Next time, when Nonon scooted backwards in response to a slice Ryuko followed it up with a brutal jab-kick to the gut that send her sprawling with a pained yelp.

"Ahh," She groaned as she sucked air back into her lungs, "What the hell!"

"That loosen you up?"

"The fuck are you talking about!"

"I'm sure the first thing Tsumugu told you when you started training with him was that you've gotta stay loose in a fight, right? Right?"

“Duh. That’s martial arts 101.”

“Well, your shoulders are in your ears,” Ryuko yanked her own shoulders up in demonstration, “Am I really that intimidating?”

“It’s cold in here.”

“Get used to it. Let’s go again.”

“Fuck you,” Nonon blurted, eyes burning. How fucking humiliating, but what had she expected? She didn’t stand a chance against an inhuman living weapon. Ryuko’d played her like a chump, and now her abdomen was cramping with the pain of her admonishment. When she looked up, she expected to see Ryuko taking a photo to document the moment, or at least laughing. Instead, she was stalking forwards with her sword arm tucked behind her back pensively.

“Hey, get up.”

“You can go, okay? You’ve made your point.” A vice grip settled on her chin, hoisting her to her feet despite every effort on her part to go completely limp. She thought her jaw might break as Ryuko lifted her face-to-face, so close that Nonon could see little sparkles of red light in her hair, feel her breath, hot as a furnace but totally steady. She hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“You gonna cry?” Ryuko growled, “You plan on acting like this every time you get licked? Consider this your second lesson: Get the fuck back up.” She set Nonon down but got no response as she was both massaging her jaw and gaping at the sudden change that had come over Ryuko. “You know how many fights I won when I wore Senketsu that started off well for me? Maybe two. That’s what you signed up for; you’re gonna get your ass handed to you. Hell, I never even beat Satsuki, or Ragyo, or even Uzu in a fair and square fight. There’ll always be someone stronger and faster than you, even if it’s just me. So this shit’s not gonna fly, got that?” For once, Nonon didn’t have a retort ready. She just squared up, quarterstaff at the ready. “That’s more like it.”

The next round went much better. Ryuko wasn’t sure if what she’d said enraged Nonon or inspired her, but all the tension cleared up and her gracefulness was back in full force. She even managed to make Ryuko backpedal a couple times, and when she did the grim smile came back. Finally, after maybe another fifteen minutes or so of furious dueling, Nonon finally managed to land a hit: a fearsome blow right across Ryuko’s knuckles.

“Cheap shot,” Ryuko said with a chuckle as they parted, “nice.”

“You’re just saying that cuz it didn’t hurt,” Nonon replied, smile now fixed on her face. She couldn’t admit it, but she was having fun even despite her recent admonishment. Her training with Tsumugu was usually centered on teaching her new techniques, it wasn’t that often that she got to just duel with no rules or restrictions. *How did I forget how fun this is? Ryuko was right, I was being soft before. Not next time, though.* “That would’ve cracked a human’s knuckles clean open.”

“Then you’re lucky I’m fighting fair today. But by all means, cheat as much as you want. No rules in a real fight.”

The fourth round was even better. With due permission to cheat, the first thing Nonon had tried to do was mash Ryuko’s foot into the floorboards, but Ryuko was too fast and she got her bokken down in time to aim a crushing blow at Nonon’s shin. Nonon managed to deflect that, and, with a lack of modesty that completely disarmed Ryuko, she pivoted directly into Ryuko and threw her elbow backwards into Ryuko’s gut. That connected with a thud that nearly knocked Ryuko off her feet; the moment she felt Nonon’s bare ass on her thigh she was too mortified to mount any defense. Despite herself, she had to laugh as they separated.

“That shit wouldn’t’ve work half as well if I weren’t gay.”

“Uh, duh, that’s why I did it.”

“Try that on a guy and you’ll have him beat before your elbow even connects.”

“Really?” Nonon shot back slyly, “You looked pretty beat yourself.”

“Hey, don’t harass me, troll doll, I got plenty of ammo to shoot back.”

“Back to this huh? And I thought we were finally playing nice.”

“Hey Snake! Did Ryuko leave yet or... Er, what the hell?” Houka trailed off as he opened the door into the test chamber.

“It’s Kamui training!” Nonon shouted reflexively, face coloring beet red.

“You wouldn’t get it,” Ryuko, on the other hand, was not just unfazed but deeply entertained by the slack-jawed confusion evident on Houka’s face and in the half-moons of his eyes that were visible above his glasses.

“Evidently not. Whose idea even was this?”

“Ryuko’s. Apparently, this is supposed to make me better at synchronizing with my Kamui.”

“Hmm, and is it working?”

“It will,” Ryuko said, “I’m showing her what I wish I knew before I put on Senketsu. Well, not everything cuz that’d be a longass list, but the stuff about Kamuis, y’know.”

“I see. Well, don’t let me stop you,” Houka pulled out a notebook and started writing something down. He didn’t seem to have anything more to say so Ryuko and Nonon got back to work. They didn’t notice when the door opened again a few minutes later.

“What on Earth is going on in here?” It was Shiro this time, and by all evidence he was just as stunned as Houka had been.

“Some new training idea that Ryuko came up with. Seems that fighting naked simulates the experience of wearing a Kamui.”

“How interesting. I’ll get some popcorn.”

“Dinner and a show, eh? You sure know how to treat me.”

“I swear to god, if this is all you have for dinner *again*, I’ll hide your motherboard until you eat.”

Somewhere in their eighth round or so, Ryuko was suddenly distracted by the vibration of her phone. Nonon hadn’t noticed it, and Ryuko wouldn’t expect her to, considering it was all the way across the ring in the disheveled heap of her clothes. So she disarmed her with a dainty super-strength tap that sent the quarterstaff flying at just the right angle sail out of her hands harmlessly.

“Sorry, I gotta take this.”

“Wha – how the hell do you have cell reception down here?”

“I’m on the wifi, duh.”

“Why did you let her on the wifi?” Nonon rounded on the boys accusingly, and they looked up from their laptops with a shared shrug.

“She was persistent,” Houka said.

“And very bored,” Shiro added.

“And relax, I installed our cybersecurity software, see?” He turned his laptop around to show a display of all the internet activity going on in Ryuko’s phone, “Nobody is monitoring this call.”

“Hey Mataro, what’s up?” Ryuko asked, trying to ignore all the chatter in the room.

“Whatever you do, don’t mention the Kamui!” Houka shouted casually. Stunned silence echoed from the other side of the phone.

“Houka what the ***fuck***.” Nonon looked like she didn’t even know how to process that slip-up.

“Way to go,” Shiro added.

“Oh shit, shit. Here, look see? The call’s totally secure, it’s just Mataro. And at this time of day he’s probably home from school, and the Mankanshoku’s apartment is under surveillance at all times,” Houka blurted all that out urgently.

“Yeah, but he still *heard that*,” Nonon’s shrill voice cut through the air even more than usual.

“I’m just saying it could have been a lot worse!” At this point, Ryuko leapt across the room to stand in the corner by a rack of weights, where the argument wouldn’t distract her as much.

“Hehe, ahhh, not much, what’s up with you?” Mataro finally asked.

“Oh, y’know. Busy week, had a big project to turn in for my art class. It turned out like shit, but I think it’s good enough for class.”

“Well, don’t show it to Mom, or else she’ll want to keep it.”

“Hey man she can have it, I sure don’t want it. I was just gonna give it to a friend to sell online like I did last time.”

“No shit. That net big bucks?”

“Oh yeah, I paid for the dude’s college. Fuckin’ weirdo religious types bought it though, of course.”

“A new ‘holy relic’, eh?”

“I guess...”

“Well, look at it this way, it’s gotta be a funny scene, all them bowing down to a half-assed watercolor of a lamp or some shit.”

“Pfft, yeah no kidding.” In actuality, that picture had been a very detailed pen and ink portrait of Mako. With her senses and extraordinary precision, drawing was something Ryuko could do *very* well, even if the artistic sensibility was developing a bit slower. She’d really tried to bring out that special quality in Mako that made her feel so, well, alive was probably the right word. However, although it looked exactly like her, Ryuko still thought it felt too inanimate. It was enough to net her an A+, though.

“Beats some fat old priest’s toe bone or whatever, anyway. Hey, um, change the subject, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure thing, ask away bro.”

“Well, it’s about the party you and Satsuki are throwing at her place in Tokyo. I was wondering if I could bring a guest.”

“Ah geez dude, I’m really sorry but I don’t think this the right place for your pals. It’s gonna be like semi-classy, cuz it’s Uzu’s return party. It’s not that I don’t like ‘em, but I doubt they’d clean up well enough.”

“No no no, not them,” Mataro said, then got a little quieter in a conspiratorial way, “A girl.”

“Oho, why didn’t you say so?” Ryuko’s tone changed entirely and a grin broke out across her face. “Yeah dude, of course.”

“Oh, okay cool,” He chuckled with relief, “Thank you. She’s dying to meet you y’know.”

“Well, I hope I don’t disappoint,” At this point Ryuko checked the time for the first time that afternoon. 4:05. She could make it back to central Tokyo in time if she beat the traffic. “So, you got anything else? I kinda gotta get going right now, but you can always call me later.”

“Nah, you’re good. See ya later, sis.”

“Bye bro, luv ya.”

“Same.”

“Alright, I’m back,” Ryuko announced as she landed back in the ring, “But I do have to go now.”

“About time, we’ve got to get started on dinner around here,” Nonon said in reply. Apparently, they’d gotten done berating Houka - he sat there hunched into his laptop, looking much chastened. Ryuko didn’t get it, as far as she understood Houka was the one who made up all their security rules in the first place. If he wanted to break them that was up to him, he knew the risks.

“Before I go, I’ve got one more quick thing to show you, Nonon.”

“Uh, alright,” Nonon grabbed her quarterstaff and squared up. Before she even knew what was happening, Ryuko was behind her, the tip of her bokken lightly pressed between Nonon’s shoulder blades. Houka and Shiro watched with nonchalant expressions as, despite her best, red faced efforts, Nonon was completely flattened to the ground.

“This is your final lesson for the day: This is just a tiny taste of my true strength. If you had Saiban, maybe you’d stand a chance. Maybe. Think on that.”

“Let me up you brute!” Nonon grunted, her voice distorted as her cheek was pressed into the floorboard. Ryuko complied with a laugh. Only a minute after that she was departing, changing back into her clothes and making sure to wring a promise out of each of them that they would come to her party. When she was up the stairs and Nonon had clothed herself, she set off after her.

“Hey wait!” She called when she spotted Ryuko in the hall. Ryuko tilted her head at her quizzically. “I, uh, I wanted to thank you,” She said hesitantly, “You - I think you were more helpful than I expected.”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, I’m not doing it for your sake, think of it as a favor to Satsuki, alright?”

“Oh, alright then.”

“But what you said before is right. It’s too important that you be a good Kamui wearer. A lot of people are counting on you, so you’d better think about what I said.”

“Sure thing,” Nonon said as Ryuko departed for good, and she meant it. That hadn’t been just a demonstration of Ryuko’s hybrid powers. It was a challenge. *Now I know what I’m training for.* Satsuki had told her that ideally, she would just be a weapon of intimidation. Maybe there would be REVOCs people with goku uniforms or even Kamui that she would have to bring to justice, but maybe not. This was concrete, though. *When I can defeat Ryuko at the full extent of her power, that’s when I’ll know. That’s when my training will be complete.*

In which Uzu makes his dramatic return

Chapter Summary

I keep saying "this next chapter's gonna be nice and short, we're just gonna get it out there real quick" and then this keeps happening. This doesn't even have every scene I wanted, but I'll fit 'em in other chapters don't worry.

Chapter Notes

There's some fun Easter eggs in this one if you wanna look (stuff to do with names, mostly)

“Yo, Troll doll! Short stuff! Pint sized!... Ugh, Nonon?” Ryuko called over from the poolside, where she dangled her feet into the water.

“What is it, Matoi?” Nonon responded, smiling smugly when Ryuko was forced to use her name.

“C’mere,” She unwrapped her arm from Haruka’s slender shoulders and gestured with a demanding finger. Meanwhile, she took a swig from the glass of gin in her other hand, not even looking at Nonon, who put her hands on her hips defiantly.

“What? Why?”

“C’mere,” Ryuko insisted, a little louder this time in case Nonon hadn’t heard over the pounding music. Nonon groaned and complied, and as she walked over with a nervous eye to Mako and Ira splashing around in the pool. Ryuko smiled a tipsy little smile. “I wanted ta assk you somethin”

“Oh geez, what could it be?”

“Oh ummm – first – Nonon, meet Haruka Naganohara, *my girlfriend*. So you see, sshe is real after all.”

“Yeah, hey it’s nice to meet you, I’m -,”

“- And this is Nonon Jakuzure, Haruka. She makes music or something, you’ve been on her website, y’know, Regalia Music?”

“Wait, you’re *Regalia*? Holy shit! I love your music!” Haruka beamed up at her with a giddy laugh. She’d been bubbling since Ryuko had first introduced her to Satsuki when the party was just getting started, and everybody was a movie star to her now, even people Ryuko just thought of as part of the gang like Fukuroda and Hakodate. As for meeting an actual famous musician, well, Ryuko could swear she could actually see her head spinning. Even if it was thanks to Nonon, Ryuko was glad she could provoke such joy in Haruka. She was filled with a new type of affection for her family of weirdos, seeing them through different eyes.

“Aw, thanks! That’s why I do it, y’know. And no, Ryuko, this doesn’t mean you get to have good taste by proxy.”

“You look tense, gurl,” Ryuko proffered her glass to Nonon, “Have a drink.”

“Ew, I’ll keep my lips far from your spittle, thanks.”

“Fine, I have the bottle right here,” Ryuko grabbed it for her. It was far from swill, a very expensive brand.

“You’re just drinking this shit straight?”

“Of course,” Since Ryuko had gotten better at controlling her resistance to drugs, she had begun drinking liquor exclusively. There was no risk of overdrinking, and if she overcompensated and got fully sober, she could quickly get back to the level she wanted, “C’mon princess, it won’t kill ya.”

“You absolute barbarian,” Nonon said, but she took a quick pull anyway, sputtering as it stung her throat. “Nah, I’m mostly just worried about getting in the crossfire from these goofballs splashing around in the pool,” She gestured to Mako, who was scrambling up Ira’s brawny shoulders and jumping off directly onto Mataro and his date. The ensuing splash fight was really not to the taste of Nonon’s and Satsuki’s high-class guests who were clustered around the pool in staid conversation, but a couple of Mako’s friends from college quickly piled in. Ira had been staunchly opposed to the whole thing on the premise that it wasn’t safe without a lifeguard, but of course Mako had solution for that: he could be the lifeguard! Somehow that made it all ok.

“Yeah, you’re dressed pretty cute today, ain’tcha?” Ryuko asked, and Nonon colored up. It was true though, she had spent an unjustifiably long time pulling together her current outfit: a thin, form fitting silk blouse with sheer, lacy sleeves, complemented by a short black pencil skirt with barely visible floral patterns embroidered with a slightly glossier black fabric. She looked every bit the sophisticated business-lady, especially with her earrings made of real pearls. Nonon wondered if Ryuko had any idea whose benefit it was for. She hoped not.

“Do you have something to ask me, Ryuko?” She asked sweetly, then suddenly turned her voice sour, “Because I was on my way to help Satsuki, y’know.”

“She told me a funny thing once, Satsuki did. She said all this,” Ryuko flicked a hand into Nonon’s hair before she could pull back, “Was natural color. Like, you’re some

kinda weirdass albino or somethin'. So that's my question, is it true, I mean?"

"What? Yeah, of course it is!"

"Seriously? You're not pullin' my leg? Cuz I was sure –,"

"Pink eyes, fucker!" Haruka suddenly looked horrified when Nonon swore in Ryuko's face – you didn't just call the great Ryuko Matoi a "fucker" – but before she could say anything, she saw Ryuko grin through it and realized that this was their normal form of interaction. "You ever seen someone with pink eyes before?"

"Those aren't contacts?"

"It's called hypomelanism, and yes it's a real thing. Yes, I really do have naturally pink eyes."

"You hear that?" Ryuko chuckled, giving Haruka a light elbow in the ribs, "Nonon's got pinkeye!" Haruka burst out laughing despite herself, and quickly put a hand over her mouth to in a vain effort to hide it from Nonon.

"I've had just about enough of this," Nonon said as she turned to go.

"W-wait, can I see?" Haruka asked, and Nonon complied with a shrug, leaning in quite close until her face was practically in Haruka's hands. Those tired-looking eyes stared into hers with an excited, energetic curiosity. Nonon saw them dip down into her blouse – just once, very, very briefly – but they were mostly transfixed studying the pale, rosy details of Nonon's irises. *Remarkable restraint compared to some people I can think of.* "Wooow, that's so pretty!" Haruka gushed with a sweet smile. Nonon's tongue stumbled on her thank-you, it wasn't every day someone complemented her on her disorder.

"No, don't," Ryuko muttered, "Don't give her that." Haruka frowned at Ryuko in feigned disapproval and giggled lightly, but still ran a hand through the ends of Nonon's hair until she stepped back. *The last thing I need right now is Ryuko's girlfriend coming on to me, or even seeming to.* "Ah shit, looks like I'm gonna have to come up with something new instead of Troll Doll now," Ryuko continued.

"Honestly, I'm surprised you'd concede that."

"Well, I can't go around making fun of you for something you have no control over, can I?"

"What? You make fun of my height all the time!"

"And you didn't drink your milk when you were a lil' kiddie. That'ss your choice." Even from sitting down, Ryuko still managed to reach up and rustle the hair on top of Nonon's head. She scoffed and quickly waved out of the way so Ryuko couldn't ruin her hairdo any further.

"Alright, alright! Geez, I think I'd rather you call me Troll Doll, at least it's a little more creative than just going after my height for the millionth time."

“But that’s also about your height too.”

“No, it’s obviously about the hair!”

“Well, Troll Dolls are tiny little things, ain’t they?”

“Oh my fucking god! I’m leaving now.” Nonon began to storm off, but turned back before she was too far away, “It was nice to meet you Haruka. I hope you’re a good influence on this one, for both our sakes.”

“Oh, it was very nice to meet you too Lady Jakuzure! A real honor!”

“Call me Nonon, *please*,” Nonon said as she faded off into the crowd with a smile. *Oh, I am definitely gonna be good friends with her. That’ll really piss Ryuko off. And she seems nice enough too.* Nonon was so tickled by that devious idea that for a few minutes she completely forgot the reason behind the whole party.

This steam is gonna be murder on my hair, Satsuki thought, pulling yet another tray of dumplings out of the industrial-sized steamer the penthouse’s kitchen came equipped with. It was being put to good use today – the dumplings were going fast. That was no surprise, it was Sukoyo’s recipe after all, and though it was just good homey food when coupled with a little garnish and some cute bowls of dipping sauces it looked like gourmet. She had no time to start moving the finished product onto platters, though. A ding from an oven on the other side of the table told her a row of kebabs needed to be turned over, and then it was over to check on one of the chef’s assistants who was pulling a large box of various meats from the walk-in freezer. Apparently, all was well there, so Satsuki sent him on his way with a breezy wave of her hand.

She had tried to convince the penthouse’s live-in chef to take the evening off, but the cheery, grandmotherly lady insisted that she go all-out for the first real party to be held there. Eventually, Satsuki had managed to talk her down to just handling the dinner, while Satsuki saw to the appetizers and Sukoyo took care of desserts. What that really meant was that Satsuki wasn’t supposed to actually do anything but oversee; there about twenty assiduous young assistants and apprentices on the kitchen staff who could handle the grunt work. But she got impatient, and rather than be snappy she decided to take care of it herself. Satsuki Kiryuin could follow a simple recipe, right? So far, the guests were saying it all tasted great. That’s what they were saying, at least, but who really knew?

“Wow, you’re sure cooking up a storm in here, huh?” Nonon asked as she wandered into the kitchen, with a gesture to the various platters that completely covered the tabletop. The dumpling trays Satsuki had just finished with were the final piece; between shrimp cocktails and puff pastries and some kind of Italian thing with meat, cheese, and bread there really was no room left.

“Well, we’ve got what, almost a hundred guests out there? That takes a fair amount of food,” Satsuki kept working as they talked, handing off platters to the waiters and waitresses that trickled through, exchanging empty ones

“Still, their appetites’ll be spoiled before we even get to dinner.”

“I doubt that. We won’t be having dinner until our guest of honor arrives, and I have assurances that he will be fashionably late.”

“Of course,” Nonon groaned, pretending not to notice Satsuki raising her eyebrows. She plucked a little pastry off the nearest plate and sampled it, but her face immediately scrunched up the moment she bit into it, “Eeuch! What the hell Satsuki this is like all lemon!”

“Those are for Ryuko.”

“Seriously, she actually like these? Fuckin’ weirdo,” Nonon dropped the rest of her ill-received pastry into the trash can with a scoff.

“Her digestion works differently from ours, it’s only natural that her tastes would be different as well.”

“Ugh, well at least you didn’t make too many of ‘em. Speaking of which, when are you gonna be done in here?”

“Eventually.”

“Well, why don’t you c’mon out with me? It’s no party without the lady of the house, y’know.”

“They have Ryuko, don’t they?”

“All she’s doing is getting drunk by the pool; trust me she’s no good for the job. C’mon, lots of people to meet – some scientist friends of the boys just turned up, there’s a bunch of Mako and Ira’s friends who are pretty nice, - oh – and I just met Ryuko’s girlfriend, she seems very nice.”

“We’ve already been introduced,” Satsuki said curtly

“Well, what about those fellows from Australia you invited, the diplomats, I don’t think they’ve been shown around yet.”

“Nonon, you’re in the way. Please, either do something helpful or move,” Satsuki shooed her away from the oven with an angry hand wave and began pulling the kebabs out, depositing them on a fresh platter.

“Alright, alright, fine. Geez, what’s gotten into you tonight?”

“Nothing. I’m just overworked here.”

“Nah, something’s pissed you off.”

“I said I’m fine!” Satsuki snapped, “Shouldn’t you be more worried about yourself tonight, hmm?” The look of hurt on Nonon’s face made her realize what she said, and

Satsuki straightened up with a sigh and an exasperated hand gesture. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Maybe I do need a break."

"Yeah," Nonon said pointedly, and Satsuki removed her apron and started cleaning up her hair.

"So how are you doing, then? With our, uh, our guest of honor."

"I don't know, how should I be doing?"

"I don't know. You don't seem to be freaking out though, so that's a start."

"Yeah, sure."

"You are nervous, aren't you?"

"Yeah, a bit. It's not the worst thing in the world, y'know. You make it out like I'm a lovesick damsel."

"I'm sure he's just as nervous to see you as you are."

"If you say so."

"I'm sure of it," By now Satsuki had finished arranging herself and was ready to return to the party. Her hair hadn't turned out as bad as she'd expected, sure there were some loose strands here and there, but her trademark sheen was unblemished. "He asked for you, you know. When I called him to make arrangements."

"Really?" Nonon asked, betraying maybe a little more excitement that she'd been intending. It had been months since she'd given the problem of Uzu much thought, the Kamui training had been a good distraction, especially once Ryuko had started dropping by regularly which certainly at least doubled its intensity. But it hadn't gone away. Satsuki nodded, and as they turned to go, they heard the click of high heels in the hallway. Nonon peered out the window of the kitchen doors and let out an involuntary squeak. "MK alert!" She whispered urgently.

"Wonderful," Satsuki said with a sarcastic thumbs-up, and Nonon stepped out of the way just in time as the doors flung open. The young woman who stepped through cut an imposing figure, nearly as tall as Satsuki and just as statuesque, indeed they looked remarkably alike. The only meaningful differences in their overall appearance were that the newcomer was a natural blonde and that she was dressed to the nines, with a regal gold-and-white gown and jewelry adorning every inch of bare skin, even including a net of garnets flashing through her hair. Likewise, their faces were quite similar, but where Satsuki's features funneled to her bold cobalt eyes and pointed chin, the newcomer's features drew almost down onto her nose, making her face seem very thin by comparison.

"Cousin!" She shouted with the declarative, velvety voice of a noble-lady, and Satsuki drew a smile as they embraced.

“Minazuki! So good to see you!” Satsuki said. This was Minazuki Kiryuin, Satsuki and Ryuko’s closest surviving blood relative and current eldest of the Kiryuin clan. She was from a lesser branch of the house on Ragyo’s side (Soichiro also being a distant member of the Kiryuin clan, which wasn’t too rare consider the clan had married into itself frequently since at least the Edo Period), and during the life fiber war had been in control of the Kiryuin Conglomerate’s Hokkaido offices. After the war, well, that was probably why she was here right now.

“Oh, it’s been quite a while, hasn’t it? But then goodness knows some of us do love to keep busy! I must say though even I didn’t think you such a workaholic that you’d play kitchen at your own little soiree,” The words spilled out of her mouth at a shocking rate. Satsuki pounced on the first lull to speak

“Well, I go where I’m needed, that’s not too surprising is it? Here, have you tried these?” She proffered a beef and shrimp kebab, “The marinade is a custom recipe that my personal chef and Sukoyo collaborated on.”

“Mmm,” Minazuki chomped down on the first hunk of beef and ripped it off the skewer, nodding that it was indeed good. “Err, Sukoyo? Who is that?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, what was I thinking. Er, Sukoyo Mankanshoku is the mother of Mako Mankanshoku, who fought with us in the war. They’re the ones that adopted Ryuko Matoi, you might have heard of them on the news.”

“Ohhh but of course. And now I suppose you’ve elevated them, and I’ll be having to kiss this yokel woman’s hand and call her lady, eh?” She joked with an elbow prod to Satsuki’s side. Satsuki couldn’t help but scowl, even though it had always been her policy to feign friendliness with Minazuki. For her part, Minazuki just laughed, “Oh I’m sorry, yes, I suppose we do owe them a lot. But what a reversal that is. Your mother, may she burn in hell, had this Lady Matoi girl’s father killed, so she went off to kill you, and now you’re cooking with her adopted peasant mother! If you remove the whole middle part, it’s like – what? – how did this happen?”

“Things do work out in strange ways sometimes, don’t they?”

“Oh, you know she’s a lesbian too? That’s what I’ve heard anyway, but I bet you know better than me.”

“I – well – yes, she is.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Well c’mon,” Minazuki smiled a grin that broke her face just a little too wide, “You must’ve at least thought about it, right? C’mon, we’re cousins, you can tell me about your *predilections*.” At this point, Nonon made the tactical error of shifting a foot, and Minazuki turned around at the noise, “Oh dear, I didn’t notice you, Miss... er... Jakuzure? My apologies.”

“It’s fine,” Nonon sulked. Minazuki had been convinced that her younger cousin was dating Nonon for years now, and apparently, she hated the idea enough that nobody could convince her otherwise.

“Either way, surely you’ve considered it. I mean, how could you not? The girl’s face is everywhere you look these days – not a bad looking one, not that I’d know anything about that. What about it, Miss Jakuzure? Wouldn’t you agree this Lady Mato’s ‘smokin’?”

“I-uh-I,” Nonon sputtered, waiting for Satsuki to intervene. *I will not stoop to having this conversation with this woman*, she swore to herself, although her lips failed to form words more from discomfort than resolve.

“Of course not! The thought never entered my mind!” Satsuki said, doing her best to maintain composure. Minazuki gave her a sly glance with raised eyebrows. Nonon, on the other hand, averted her eyes, but from the exchange she picked up one interesting detail. *So, she doesn’t know Ryuko is a Kiryuin. Well, she did want us to keep her personal history away from the public, not our fault. Still, it must look pretty suspicious to Minazuki that Ryuko is moving in here next semester.*

“Sure, sure. Oh, but, speaking of things working out in strange ways, it’s been a while since I checked up about getting back to work with the Conglomer – er – Foundation. I mean, it’s not that I dislike the consulate, but being out of the family business I just feel like I’m spinning my wheels, y’know? Oh, and *of course* about getting my dear little brother out of jail. So, how’s progress?”

“Well, on the first count, I did tell you I’d let you know when an opening you’d be interested in was available,” She wasn’t pulling from a large range there. When the Conglomerate had first been converted into the Kiryuin Foundation, Satsuki had offered all her surviving relatives who weren’t collaborators with Ragyo positions that suited them; it would have looked heartless to let them hit the streets. But Minazuki hadn’t been at all pleased by the low-level managerial jobs Satsuki sent her way, she wanted a position at least as prestigious as her former, deserving or not. So, she would have to wait quite a while. “As for your brother, I am afraid that’s really not up to me anymore. He was tried by a jury; his fate now rests in the hands of the appeals court. That’s how things work now,” Minazuki’s younger brother, on the other hand, was a far more clear-cut case. He had worked for REVOCs and was a high-ranking member of Ragyo’s doomsday cult. He would rot in prison until he repented, started confessing some useful information, or perished. But Minazuki hadn’t been informed of any of this, she didn’t work for the Kiryuin Foundation science branch or the military, so she knew nothing about why he was imprisoned since they were the only people informed of the REVOCs cult’s existence. Frankly, Satsuki doubted she would care if she did know.

“Yes, but you made all that stuff up, so couldn’t you just... y’know?”

“That would defeat the entire purpose. This is all in the interest of fairness, you understand,” Minazuki stared at her with glowering eyes that said that she would never understand.

“Oh sure, sure. Hey, look, I was just asking.”

“Well, you can look forward to the appeals court, that’s what I have for you for now. But listen, if you ever need anything, you just let me know. The Foundation will look after you.”

“Of course, of course. Well, as much as I love our little chats, I do think I’ll peruse your assembled guests now. Who knows, maybe I’ll run into Lady Matoi. I’ll be sure send her your regards, since you seem happy to stay cooped up here all night.” With that, Minazuki Kiryuin vanished out through the doors, leaving a fuming Nonon and a Satsuki who seemed to visibly deflate with relief.

“I do not like that woman,” Nonon declared, and Satsuki nodded.

“I’ve told you, she had no idea of Ragyo’s plans. There’s video evidence of her being captured by a COVER in their conquest of Japan, she was clearly terrified. Have Houka show you if you don’t believe me.”

“No, I know that. I meant I just don’t like her.”

“Yeah, I know. It seems when your relations aren’t trying to destroy the world, you just have to find some way to get along with them.”

“Nah, you had all mine arrested, remember?”

“Okay, fine, if your relations aren’t trying to destroy the world or operating slave-labor sweatshops you have to get along with them.”

“There ya go.”

It was about half past seven when an excited buzz swept through the guests who crowded the penthouse’s glittering, lamp-lit great hall and puddle-spattered patio. The guest of honor was coming. Uzu Sanageyama, the greatest swordsman who’d ever lived, master of the mind’s eye, who’d talked back to His Imperial Majesty of America and got out alive, who’d singlehandedly saved hundreds from a raging brush fire in Spain, and who’d had all sorts of adventures all across Europe and Africa to boot. Even though nobody knew exactly what “on his way” meant, people began crowding around the elevators the moment Satsuki made the announcement. This was Ryuko’s cue to haul herself out of the pool and check her phone, and sure enough it buzzed not long after she got to it.

Yo I’m down by the front doors. Ready whenever you are the text read. She replied:

Dropping down RNOne dramatic entrance coming up**

Hell yeah

She gave Haruka a quick peck on the cheek and told her that she’d spotted something weird going on down on the street and that she would be back before Sanageyama arrived, then dove headfirst off the side of the patio, hurtling down to the street below. Campfires were

burning, her followers staking out the building as they always did, so rather than land on the ground she dropped onto a streetlight like an enormous bird. Nobody noticed, nobody except a man more than twenty yards away in the evening gloom, leaning up against the wall by the doors to the building's lobby. Even though his back had been turned, he straightened up and smiled.

"Long time no see," Uzu grinned as Ryuko vaulted over and landed on soft, bare feet. She left sopping, chlorinated footprints on the red carpet. "I see you're as sharp as ever."

"Man, you have no idea. How's it going, you crazy bastard!" She said as she gave him an exuberant hug. She hadn't given a thought to how dripping the pool had left her until he let out a surprised little noise. "Ah shit, well that was smooth of me, huh?"

"Nah, it's cool, it's just a gi," He spread an arm to show the tough black fabric of a traditional Kendo uniform, the sort of rough canvass material water didn't get into too quickly.

"Huh, so it is. Hey man, why are you wearing a gi? And you oughta take off these sunglasses, you look like you're still blind."

"People expect a Kendo master, so here I am! I'll give you that the glasses gotta go, it's gonna be too dark for 'em soon anyway." He tucked them into his collar, revealing gigantic, moony grey eyes, "Alright, we gonna do this shit?"

"Yeah, it's about time, folks're waiting. C'mon, I've got a good spot lined up." They picked their way in between tents and wandering acolytes in their red and black robes. Fortunately, with her hair matted down by the pool and a nondescript black one-piece bathing suit she didn't fit the globally recognized image of Ryuko Matoi, and they'd also been careful not to say each other's names. Nobody recognized either of them, although one cultist did ask what the party at the penthouse was for. As soon as they'd shooed him off, Ryuko stopped and told Sanageyama this was the best spot. The plan was quite simple: Ryuko stood behind Uzu and wrapped her arms around his chest, underneath his armpits. He grabbed onto her arms for dear life, as if he was suddenly having second thoughts.

"This isn't gonna mess up my hair, is it?"

"Dude, are you fucking kidding?"

"Oh. Alright."

"You want like a hat or something?"

"Nah, I'll deal. We've wasted enough time already... Alright, I'm set. Boost me, baby!"

And with that, Ryuko sprung off the ground with a gust of wind. Rocketing up to the penthouse had become second nature as she got used to hanging out there frequently. She'd had plenty of time to consider the idea of dropping someone off on the patio, to map

out the trajectory just right so their velocity at impact would be quite low. She remembered the diagrams from her physics class – no idea what the numbers were supposed to be, of course – but the image of the arc was clear in her mind and she gave Uzu and shove at just the right time. With a grunt, he soared the last couple yards on his own while she continued upward until she reached the roof. Just before Uzu landed on an emptied patio, Ryuko heard a voice from inside.

“Hey! Look over there!” It was Mataro, pointing to where Uzu was about to land with impeccable timing. With all the guests crowded around the Penthouse’s main elevator expectantly, his shout drew nearly one hundred turned heads, followed by shocked gasps as Uza slammed down on to the patio on one knee, arms at his sides, striking a mighty “superhero pose” and kicking up dust and leaves and puddles of pool water. As he stood up and brushed his flowing, if slightly messy, green-black locks out of his face, the partygoers surrounded him and barraged him with so many cheers and questions that he couldn’t possible address all of them. He didn’t even manage to shout a “what’s up!” over the racket. Eventually Ira and another tall gentleman hoisted him up and carried him inside like the star player of a football game.

Uzu couldn’t help but chuckle to himself over the roar of the partygoers and the music. His entrance had worked perfectly, there wasn’t a single person on the premises that didn’t know that, but there was still one piece left – ah, there she was, by Satsuki’s side as always, and – *uh oh*. Nonon had fixed him with a furious scowl, the only one he could see in the entire room. But it was the only one that mattered. What had he been thinking? Of course she wasn’t impressed by his little trick, what would she call it, “pompous showboating”? She probably thought the gi looked stupid, too. Shame suddenly seized him, but then he was in too deep now, and there was a crowd expectantly waiting. He’d do better next time.

“Alright everyone! I’m Uzu Sanageyama, for those who don’t know, back in Japan at long fuckin’ last! And let me just say this is one hell of a welcome!” After Ira and the other fellow set him down, he stood on the back of a couch to address everyone. The young folks let out a roaring cheer, noble and commoner alike, and since there were maybe five people above thirty in the entire building it was very loud cheer. Nonon turned to say something to Satsuki, then set off towards the main dining hall. “Now, I ain’t goin’ anywhere tonight, and I hope y’all aren’t either!” he continued, “But first, let’s eat, cuz I’m fuckin’ starved!”

While all this went on, Ryuko slid off the roof back onto the patio, smiling to herself at the success of the plan. Mataro was the only one who hadn’t gone in to see Uzu, and he waited expectantly until she’d returned to the ground.

“Great work bro, exactly as planned,” she grinned. Mataro had been the only one in on their plan except Satsuki, who had insisted on being consulted for safety reasons. He nodded in response with a smile.

“Thanks, if there’s one thing I’m good at it’s drawing attention to myself. So, ya hungry?”

“Not really, honestly. I ate a lot of appetizers, and you know how I am about food.”

“Then, would you mind talking for a sec?”

“Sure, what’s up bro?”

“Nah, I meant like... talk privately... y’know?”

“Oh, um alright.” Ryuko said and set off for that out-of-the way game room. A confusing sort of excitement settled on her. She already knew what this was gonna be about.

The whole gang was finally reassembled, filed up and down the main dining table with a seemingly unconquerable cornucopia of food sandwiched between them. The table was wide enough that both Satsuki - the host - and Uzu - the guest of honor - could share the head of the table, and there was a great deal of good-natured arguing over who should get to sit nearest to them. That was no surprise, before his departure Uzu had acquired a reputation as “everybody’s best friend”, and by and large it was fitting. He had an interest motorcycles and sports cars to share with Ryuko, a childhood spent on the streets for Mataro (although neither of them had taken their seats yet), bodybuilding and fitness for Ira, men’s fashion for Aikuro, martial arts for Satsuki and Tsumugu, video games and pop culture for Houka and Shiro, and of course food and just generally having a good time for Mako. So everybody wanted their chance to catch up with him – well, almost everybody. Nonon didn’t join in the bickering, she just took a spot and helped herself to the food. Still, Uzu could see plain as day that she kept sneaking glances over at him, even when his back was turned. They didn’t *seem* to be angry glances, and Uzu tried very hard not to get distracted from his current conversation. *Shit, shit, shit. Is this good or bad?* Despite having had plenty of practice talking to women over the past months, he felt totally disarmed.

“I think the worst one was Swedish – not because it itself is that difficult,” He was saying to Aikuro, “Mostly because I basically had one plane flight to learn it, and also up until then I’d been in Latin language country – Spain, France, Italy, y’know. But man it was worth it, though. The food, the sights, oh, and you should’ve seen the women... er...,” Aikuro didn’t seem to notice the panicked way he looked over to Nonon, or the way she looked back, “Well, it was nice, y’know. I don’t think it beat Switzerland, but it was up there.”

Meanwhile, Satsuki found herself in an uncomfortable conversation of her own. Even though she hadn’t taken her place yet, everyone had ceded a seat near the head of the table to Ryuko; it seemed like the thing to do. As a result, the nearest person to Satsuki wound up being her date, Haruka, who bounced into her seat looking equal parts excited and terrified. Not wanting her to be left out of the conversation, Satsuki started off just by asking her what she studied in college. It wasn’t long though before her stumbling, noncommittal responses, constantly second guessing if she was saying the right thing, grated on Satsuki’s nerves. *This woman isn’t strong*, Satsuki thought, already not really listening to her, *Ryuko could never respect someone who can’t look a person in the eyes when speaking to them, I know that*. Mako had taken over when Satsuki started phoning in her responses – it turned out Haruka was from a town in East Kanto where the Mankanshoku’s had stayed briefly before going to Honoujji, and they reminisced about local landmarks and such – but Satsuki cut in with another more serious question about Haruka’s aspirations for the future. Again, her response was disappointingly vague and filled with breathy “I don’t know”s, *Sure, she’s*

pretty, but she's got no ambition, no drive, Satsuki thought, momentarily forgetting that Ryuko herself was still trying to figure out what she would do with her life, or that she sometimes had her own doubts about her direction. Anger burned in her chest. *I don't understand it. You aren't special, I don't know you, nobody knows you. Why would she give up Mako, the best friend she's ever had, for you? What do you have that she doesn't? What do you have that I don't? Oh no.*

Satsuki realized where her line of thought was going much, much too late. Nausea seized her, and she set down her chopsticks. She couldn't even look at her plate, she couldn't look at Haruka, or Mako, or Ryuko's empty chair, or any of them. Nobody even noticed the sudden change that had come over her. And if they had what would she even say? If Ira or somebody had asked what was wrong, the words escaped her, she who had practically wrote the book on deception at the meagre age of five. *"Oh, sorry, it's nothing. I just realized that I still have this sick infatuation with my own goddamn sister."*

Fortunately for her, a new distraction presented itself, when Uzu stabbed down a fork angrily. He had been talking quietly to Nonon for a minute or two, but if Satsuki had been paying attention she might have noticed the billowing tension that lead to this outburst.

"Well, I'm sorry for trying to liven things up here! Y'know, some people actually like having fun every now and then if you hadn't noticed, *your highness!*"

"And all *I'm* saying is that maybe if you acted like an *adult* you wouldn't have to lam it across the entire United States cuz you flipped off their emperor! But no, evidently that's still beyond you," Nonon shot back. Now all eyes were on the two of them, even some guests at the smaller tables throughout the dining hall were looking at their beet red faces.

"Oh, right, because adults always call everyone bitches and storm out when they don't get their way, right? That's *very mature*, huh?"

"Like you have any right to lecture me about that! You lost once – just once – and you blinded yourself! You're the king of overreacting and you know it!"

"Oh yeah? So, what would you call what you're doing right now?" Nonon gasped hoarsely at that and in a flash she stood up and stormed out, clearly hating to prove Uzu right even as she retreated out into the main hall with glassy eyes. For an uncomfortably long moment silence reigned. The side tables resumed their conversations first.

"Sooo... when's the wedding?" Houka quipped dryly, although Shiro was the only one who laughed. Uzu buried his face in his hands with a stifled groan. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd done it again.

It was another few minutes until Satsuki felt like everyone was roughly back to normal, although the mood was still understandably tense. Once she was comfortable with it, she stood up. "I'll go check on her," She declared to no-one in particular. She'd lost her appetite anyway.

“You alright?” Satsuki asked, and Nonon looked up with surprise from the sofa where she nestled herself, over in a reading nook with a small fireplace. Despite the summer heat she’d thrown a blanket over herself, and she looked very small and frail underneath it. That red cheeked, distraught look – was she crying? No, but it was a near thing.

“Oh, hey,” Nonon said quietly, pulling up her legs to make room for Satsuki to sit.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“That asshole. You see? It’s exactly what I told you.”

“Well, then I guess you know now,” Satsuki said slowly, making sure she was recalling exactly what Nonon had told her, “So, if it’s just a physical attraction, and you two really don’t get along, you can move on from it.”

“No no no! Satsuki that’s not it at all! He’s soo great sometimes, so nice, but then it’s like this and he’s like a completely different person! Fuck him, I can be fun too, right?” Satsuki didn’t really see that much inconsistency in his behavior, he clearly wasn’t bipolar or anything, but she had to admit that the two of them tended to play off each other in a less than loving manner.

“Are you sure you aren’t making too much of this? He’s just gotten back after being away for so long, it’s gotta be very emotional for him. Maybe he’ll be more his usual self once he settled in.”

“See, here’s the thing. Right before he left, he kept asking me out, right? But I didn’t want – he’s gone after so many girls, right? – so I told him if he really cared he could show it by cleaning up his act. Be someone I’d actually consider dating. He didn’t like that very much, and now, you see... He didn’t do it. I fucking blew it.”

Satsuki consider for a moment telling her how he’d hung his head when she’d stormed off, but she couldn’t quite get the words out. Something told her it would be wrong to give Nonon false hope – really, she had no idea what was going on inside Uzu’s head. Sometimes people were so predictable, everything she’d accomplished was based on her ability to know what people were going to do months before they did it, but when it came to matters of the heart there was a brick wall she just couldn’t peer over. *Fraud that I am, sitting here giving out relationship advice when my love life’s, well, how it is.*

“And now it’s all out there. All our friends know, and some random people too.”

“Not Ryuko, though.”

“Yeah,” Nonon said with a chuckle, “That’s an upshot, I guess. Otherwise I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Where did she run off to, anyway?” *If only she’d been there. I bet none of this would’ve happened if Ryuko was there, somehow.*

The game room was secluded, sure, but it also was filled with computers and TV screens. Before Ryuko even let Mataro speak, she hurried around and unplugged everything she could see.

“So, is it true?” Mataro ambushed her with it the moment the door was closed. Ryuko sobered herself up all the way in a flash.

“Is what true?”

“C’mon, you know. The Ka-,”

“Hey! Shit hold on don’t *say* the word.”

“Alright, alright. But I gotta know.”

“Do you? Because what you’re suggesting’s pretty serious. If it were true, this would be top-secret shit. So why would I tell you?”

“If it weren’t, you would have just said no,” Mataro said with a triumphant grin.

“I -,” Ryuko pursed her lips in frustration. He had her there. But why? Why did he care so much? There could only be one reason. “What do you wanna know?” She said in her best, most serious monotone.

“It’s not what I want to know,” Mataro said, even more serious. When had his cheeks thinned out and become so strong and defined? Maybe it was just the lighting. *Or maybe he actually has grown up a little. Maybe...*

“I want in.”

Ryuko couldn’t help but smile. What a monumentally bad idea. Well, he was her protégé, after all.

“Hell yeah.”

In which Mataro is left waiting

Chapter Summary

A short, plot heavy chapter (but there's developing Ryuko/Satsuki and Nonon/Uzu in there if you squint). There will be a 10.5 with some short scenes following up on this approximately when I have the damn time. After that next up is another vignette series and that's gonna be fairly long so we'll all have fun with that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It started with a text conversation between Ryuko and Houka:

Hey, you up?

Always

Something important

Really

YeahYou fucked up**I'm bringing Mataro by the place**

Oh shitYeah, I hear you**Should I bring the others?**

Yeah, definitelySats too**

And so she found herself down in the messy break room of the secret lab, tapping her foot anxiously as all the deciding voices assembled. Houka, Shiro, Aikuro, and Tsumugu were there of course, then there was Nonon, as the future wearer of a kamui (although Ryuko thought that was a pretty tenuous reason for her involvement). And then, as their *de facto* overseer, Satsuki.

Ryuko hadn't seen Satsuki since Uzu's welcome home party, when she'd been in such a sour mood. Actually, it was since the morning after that. She had stayed the night in her cramped quarters, and because she'd had maybe one glass of wine the entire night, as usual, she was up early helping the guests who had crashed there find their stuff and get on their way home. By the time Ryuko and Haruka stumbled out of the master bedroom she was the only one there except Soroi and the house-staff, but she hadn't wanted to stay and chat. Which was a shame, because Haruka had told Ryuko an intriguing story about an argument between Nonon and Uzu about which she was excited to gossip, but she'd hardly been able to

ask about it before Satsuki poured some tea into a travel mug and set off, saying she had lots of work to do. And when Ryuko had offered to carry her off the patio to ground floor she had *shuddered*.

It was a slight thing, maybe even imperceptible to the human eye, but Ryuko noticed. Had she blacked out and done something regrettable, or worse, *said* something Satsuki didn't want to hear? She didn't think so, and when she asked around later everybody conceded that she'd been pretty coherent all night, even Nonon. But in the two weeks that had followed Ryuko hadn't been able to pin Satsuki down for lunch and hadn't seen her around the penthouse, even though she knew she was in Tokyo for business quite frequently. She had even turned down a Saturday mountain-biking excursion, and she loved those! To make everything worse she'd been worse about responding to texts too, sometimes it took hours, and this frustrated Ryuko to no end. And now here she was, bent over a coffee table piled high with physical paperwork and laptops, studiously bustling through what looked like mind-numbing work. She'd barely even said hello, and although she'd given everyone the same treatment that didn't make it sting less. And when Ryuko tried to strike up a conversation she gave only noncommittal, nonverbal answers. *C'mon, talk to me. I'm fuckin' dying over here.*

Oh, and Uzu was there too, although as Ryuko quickly found out he wasn't part of their little meeting, he was just there for a tour of the lab. It had been under construction when he left, and he was one of the few people given security clearance to see it, so he figured he might as well. Esteemed diplomats ought to be well informed about their own country's secret projects, right? Plus, he'd heard that all four scientists and Nonon were practically living down there, which was such a strange setup he couldn't help but be curious what they were up to. When everyone was gathered, he pulled up a chair and asked why everyone was looking so damn glum.

"Well, as I understand it, Mataro accidentally overheard some discussion of Kamui Saiban, courtesy of Houka here-" Aikuro summarized, and Houka hung his head in continuing shame.

Uzu's eyes went even wider than normal and he whispered to Shiro, "*The new Kamui's gonna be on the tour, right?*"

"-And you didn't feel comfortable lying to him about it, so now you've brought him and his parents here to fully let him in on it, is that right?"

"Well, there's... a bit more to it than that. He, uh, he wants his own Kamui." The room went dead silent as Satsuki stopped typing and looked up with the sort of stormy expression the old Satsuki frequently wore. Everyone else registered surprise to some degree except Houka, who nodded slightly like he'd seen it coming.

"I'm sorry, what?" Nonon blurted.

"A-and I think he'd be a good Kamui wearer," Ryuko continued, eyes glued on Satsuki. Oh, she was not happy about this. Which was why it was important that they got everybody together; someone would agree with Ryuko and together they stood a better chance. Nobody spoke, and Tsumugu made a hand motion that she should continue, "Now look, he's still just a sophomore in high school, so like I don't mean you're gonna start working on it right now.

But he's willing to train nonstop, that's gotta be an advantage, starting out so young, right? And he's the best kid on his school's track team by a long shot, fights way above his weight class, and we all know he can take care of himself in dangerous situations. I mean, he was *there* for the whole thing, so he knows what the stakes are, how serious this shit is. More that you could explain to someone who wasn't there. Plus, we talked about it a little, so he knows what to expect in terms of the whole synchronization deal and the telepathy and everything. And remember how much of a little creep he was back then? Well, maybe not cuz none of you would've hardly know him, but he's like way more mature now. He's got himself an honest-to-god girlfriend and most of the kids at his school think he's a pretty stand-up guy. I- I dunno I feel like that's all I gotta say," Ryuko finished reciting the mental list she'd been working on and crossed her arms resolutely.

"Well, if nobody else'll say it let me be the first to point out what a fucking stupid idea this is. All this shit I've gotta do is not for kids. I thought you'd get that since you've almost killed me *at least* once a week. Plus, I do *not* want that twerp running around here. He'll just get in the way," Nonon said dismissively. That tone of voice always irritated Ryuko, but then, it was supposed to.

"Wait, hold on, *you're* gonna wear the new Kamui?" It was Uzu's turn to be shocked now, and he put a far more incredulous tone on the question than he'd meant to.

"As a matter of fact, I am. And you're not even part of this conversation, so either buzz off or quit it with all the moronic questions!"

"Now hold on, if this is something that's on the table why am I not being considered? You all know I'd be good for it!"

"Oho no! It's always just been more and more power with you, always on the lookout for your next strongest opponent! We make you a Kamui and we'll be back to the stone age in a year!"

"That's just not true and you know it, Nonon," Uzu wisely reigned himself in before he lost his temper. *Stop looking at me like that*, he shouted internally, *what, what was so wrong with just asking?* "I've seen so much shit out there – we're gonna need more than one Kamui to start bringing these people to justice. Satsuki, c'mon, how 'bout it?"

"This is all quite unnecessary," Shiro intervened before Satsuki could. "We have already discussed this and decided should the creation of another Kamui be necessary – and it probably will be - Aikuro is the best choice to be its wearer." Aikuro did a little bow, and when Uzu opened up his mouth to protest he shut it for fear of being rude, "He's already an accomplished soldier and secret agent and, as we all know, has long since overcome his hold-ups with nudity. Or maybe never had them in the first place. So, synchronization should be no problem for him. Really, he's the ideal candidate."

"Stop that now, you're gonna make me blush," Aikuro said with a chuckle, "Well, what can I say? It's not something I'd planned on but if it comes to that I'll be up for it."

"Back on the matter at hand," Shiro continued, "In the case of Mataro I must admit I'm intrigued. Mako was noted - several times – to have a very strong connection to life

fibers, a heightened level of compatibility over even Ryuko. It's possible the same is true of her brother – that it's genetic – and I'd very much like to find out. What do you think?" He turned to Houka.

"Oh, yes, and besides that I can attest that what Ryuko said about his maturity is true too," Houka weighed in, then explained, "We play VR games together a lot, so I spend a lot of time with 'im. He's getting a lot more responsible"

"How the hell do you have time to play video games with all this?" Nonon snarked with a gesture around the lab.

"There's just two things that I do. My work here, and video games."

"You definitely do more than two things," Shiro said dryly.

"You are *undermining* my *point*."

"Erm, I also think training the kid's worth a shot," Aikuro added, "Starting out so early, it's a great opportunity. We could teach him right. Who knows, he might even turn out better than any of us. And if things aren't working out, we can always bail. It's the training that'd take years, the actual construction of the Kamui would probably take, what, a few months?"

"A few months to half a year, yeah," Shiro said, "Although we still aren't quite there on figuring out how to do it yet, so there's that."

"Well, there you go. So long as he understands that it's just a trial thing, I don't see an issue with it. Tsumugu?"

"If he really wants it, let him pursue the training on his own and come back in a few years," Blunt as ever, but Tsumugu hadn't said a thing yet so he'd been weighing things up internally, "You're suggesting we promise a fifteen-year-old kid that level of power. I wasn't happy about relying on you all back then when you were teenagers, that's no secret, and I don't want to do it again. Even if his heart is in the right place, it will lead to a sense of entitlement."

Shiro nodded that he saw the point and opened his mouth for a rebuttal, but Satsuki spoke up before he could, declaring, "We will not be moving forward with this project, I forbid it."

"But Satsuki!" Ryuko whined, but Aikuro cut her off.

"With all due respect Satsuki, this is a question for the Research Complex to decide. Now, you should have a say since he's family, but you don't have the authority to outright veto it."

"We agreed that any Kamui wearers would be integrated into the military, placing them under my jurisdiction, remember? So yes, I think I do have the authority. Ryuko," She said, turning her attention away and leaving Aikuro to mull that over.

“Yeah?”

“I can’t believe you would even suggest this.” *No no no, why don’t you get it?* Ryuko felt a burn of panic and guilt. “Your own brother?”

“Hey, it was his idea in the first place!”

“And you went along with it. I won’t permit our brother to be put in danger like this. Don’t you want him to be able to live a normal life, Ryuko?”

“I mean, sure, but -,”

“Have you considered what would happen to him once he became too old to wear the Kamui? If he even survives that long. His whole life the consequences of his actions would haunt him – the celebrity, the people he killed, the enemies he made. He’d never be safe. It’s no easy thing, trust me.”

“But shouldn’t that be something for him to decide? Look, can we just bring him down here and let him talk? You’ll see, he knows what he’s in for.”

“We can’t bring him down until we decide what we’re gonna do with him, because if we send him away with nothing we can’t risk him talking about what’s down here. And we can’t talk in the conference room, it’s theoretically possible for someone to listen in,” Houka said cut in to explain, “That’s the unfortunate thing.”

“Even if he thinks he knows, he’s still just a boy. He’s not ready to make rational decisions about this.”

“C’mon, he’s older than any of you were when you first started. Hell, you were a toddler when dad told you everything. Why’s this gotta be any different? And don’t give me any of that ‘we were special’ crap!”

“That’s true, but I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy,” Satsuki said, then when Ryuko raised a skeptical eyebrow she stumbled, “Er, well, really I would with that and much worse on her. But that’s just a figure of speech. The whole point of what we do is so that others won’t have to be subjected to that kind of life.”

“But you just said you’re objecting because he’s your brother! Don’t you think that’s a little unfair, huh? Why should he get a free pass, especially when that isn’t even what he *wants*? He *wants* to help, most people in his place wouldn’t even go that far.”

“That’s not the only reason and you know it! And what about you? Surely you realize he’s trying to emulate you. I didn’t take you as so prideful that you’d swallow that flattery.”

“Yeah, that’s rich coming from you! And what, am I such a screw-up that my own little brother shouldn’t look up to me? Who cares why he does it if something good comes from it!”

“That’s enough!” Tsumugu intervened, “We’re getting nowhere with this. I understand your concern,” He said to Satsuki, “And yes, I would say he’s too young to be put to this. But you must admit that it does look a little hypocritical to forbid him when we’re considering recruiting Kamui wearers from outside our circle if it comes to that.”

“It’s. Not. Happening.” Satsuki growled.

“How about we put it to a vote?” Tsumugu suggested, “C’mon now, let’s get in the habit for when we disagree about other more important things down the line.”

“...Fine,” She conceded, but glared out at everybody with a look that dared them to vote against her.

“C’mon, you’re gonna vote on it without even talking to him? Let me get ‘im, please.”

“I’m afraid not, we just can’t permit him down here without a reason.”

“Alright, alright.”

“Ok then,” Aikuro said, and cleared his throat, “All in favor.”

“Aye,” Houka, Shiro, and Aikuro said in unison.

“All opposed.”

“Nay,” The response, this time from Satsuki, Nonon, and Tsumugu.

“Okay, now what?” Ryuko said while everyone else sat there pondering what to do about the tie. “I-I guess I’ll be the tie breaker?”

“No,” Aikuro said with a sigh, which was fortunate because both Satsuki and Nonon looked like they were about to blurt something angry “I don’t think that would be fair since it’s your idea. I guess we’ll have to defer it.”

“Why don’t we have Uzu do it?” Nonon suggested.

“Wait, seriously?” Uzu exclaimed.

“You wanted to be involved, didn’t you?”

“If you don’t feel qualified to weigh in that’s alright, but I don’t have an issue with it. You’re part of our inner circle, you should act it, right?” Aikuro said.

“I mean, sure,” Uzu said nonchalantly, but to himself he admitted that he was stuck. She definitely wanted him to vote her way, but if he did, wouldn’t that set a precedent of being more likely to turn down potential Kamui wearers? That might bite him in the ass later. And what was the actual right choice, putting himself aside? He wanted to believe in the kid, after all he wasn’t much younger than the rest of them and if they could rise to the occasion then so could he. Plus, he had to admit it would be cool – the beginning of the next

generation – it stirred the imagination. But if he died, not only would that be rough on its own, but Satsuki and Ryuko and Mako and their parents would all be devastated. He couldn't shoulder the blame for that. Seven pairs of eyes bored into him. Nonon's, Ryuko's, Satsuki's. He knew which he could afford to disappoint more. After a long moment, he spoke, "Nay, sorry Ryuko."

"Ah, that's alright," Ryuko said, deflating a little. "Boy, we're *real democratic* around here, aren't we, coercing the electorate," She muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Satsuki asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Well, that settles that," Aikuro said breezily, trying to tone down a bit of the tension. For his part it was a relief to be done with it either way; it was an interesting opportunity sure, but he wouldn't lose any sleep over it. "Sorry Ryuko."

"Yes, I am sorry Ryuko, I didn't mean it as -," Satsuki began.

"Nah, nah it's alright. Not your fault, I get why," Ryuko moped. She couldn't sell it. Hell, whatever was making Satsuki so distant lately might have been the same thing that made her react with such hostility. It was a bitter pill, letting him down, only more so because if it had been someone else instead of her it might have gone through. If Houka had just slipped an application across Aikuro's desk or something. More even than before she needed to know what had happened between her and Satsuki. "Well, who's gonna tell him?"

Meanwhile, Mataro paced furiously around the presidential conference room, nervously glancing at the spot on the wall the elevator had disappeared into. He had long since made up his mind, and now the waiting was agonizing. It was all the more so because try as he might he couldn't fully imagine what was going on down there. They were discussing it, but what were they saying? In his imagination it was all very arcane; there was a long wooden table in a dark room, Satsuki was at the head – of course – Mr. Mikisuki at the other side, they called the meeting to formal order, everybody had businessy little folders in front of them. Ryuko probably worded the question very carefully, and then... what? They would go back and forth in debate, sure, but he just couldn't begin to guess who would say what. It was enough that before long Sukoyo was asking him if he really had to keep pacing. Both she and Barazo had no real idea what was going on, Ryuko and Mataro just told them there was an important question they wanted to ask at the lab and that they should come along. Neither of them had anywhere to be, so they came along without a fuss and were idly talking about a TV show they'd been watching together lately.

Mataro was debating with himself what he would say if they agreed, trying to come up with a response that covered all the bases that would be expected: humbled, dutiful, determined, excited. It would be a historic moment, he thought, even though it would happen in the confines of a secret lab beyond the sight of the world. He had to be ready. But then there was also the possibility they would say no. He almost didn't really believe that, but to

be reasonable he had to accept that it could happen. And if it did, he didn't know what he would say. What he would do next, on the other hand...

Eventually the elevator reappeared, and Mr. Mikisuki stepped out. With a somber look he motioned for them all to follow him. On the elevator ride down, he gave his standard speech about security and not telling a single soul what they saw here, but when the doors opened Mataro couldn't help but wonder what there was to tell about. All the break room's doors were closed, all the monitors switched off – this was the workaround to avoid showing him anything he need not see – so what he was left with was a dingy, messy little hangout. *Maybe I underestimated how much time they spend down here.* The assembled group did look sufficiently serious though (except Nonon, who was on her phone), and one way or another Mataro could tell they were prepared to give him one hell of a talking to.

Once they took their seats, Mr. Mikisuki - with the help of Mr. Kinagase, Houka, and Shiro - began explaining what the secret lab was, before moving on to Mataro and the Kamui. They went about it in the most roundabout way possible, for the benefit of his parents, and not only did it frustrate him, but it also filled him with anxiety – wouldn't they have just flat out said if they'd accepted him? For their part Barazo and Sukoyo didn't seem all that surprised or concerned even when they heard that Mataro had asked if he could wear a Kamui. But that was probably because it was immediately followed up by:

"However, after due consideration, we have decided to decline. Sorry sport." In the pause that followed, everyone looked to him for a response. Ryuko was still looking quite despondent, clearly feeling responsible. Satsuki, on the other hand, looked sorry but not nearly as much. This was probably her doing, Mataro thought, and really, he couldn't blame her.

"Oh, alright. Do I... ah... do I get ta know why?"

"Mainly that you are too young both to be trusted with this responsibility, as well as to be ethically subjected to this experimental technology. Also concerns for your safety, obviously. I can go into more detail if you want."

"No, that's alright. Thank you for your time." But he wasn't done. Someone who aspired to wear a Kamui couldn't be held back by such a simple setback. He stood up, "Yo, Uzu, now that you're back I was wondering if I could take Kendo lessons with you."

"Uh, okay? Sure, I'll be opening up my dojo pretty soon."

"I'll pay full price, of course, don't worry."

"Not necessary, little dude," Satsuki had been about to turn her attention back to her laptop, but now she was staring at him with her mouth slightly open, clearly wondering with some alarm if he was really doing what she thought he was.

"Mr. Kinagase, I'd like to start tagging along to Ryuko's martial arts training with you, if that's alright."

"It's always been open to you, but I'll warn you we don't cut newbies slack."

“That’s fine by me. And, Mr. Mikisuki?”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re not too busy I’d like to set up some sharpshooting lessons with you sometime.”

“I think we could work something out,” Aikuro responded with a sly smile. *He gets what’s going on here.*

“Oh, and Houka? Or Shiro either one, if I could maybe get some tutoring sessions with one of you that would be great. Math ain’t exactly my strong suit.”

“Er, sure.”

“Excellent. Nonon?”

“Oh goody, my turn. Whaddya want, kid?”

“A schedule of your workout routine, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

“Here, I’ve got it,” Houka said, “I’ll email it to you just as soon as I edit the secret stuff out.”

“Thanks,” Mataro said while Nonon groaned. Now the last one, “And, uh, Satsuki?”

“Yes?” Satsuki asked suspiciously, shooting a glance over to Ryuko. She was chuckling to herself and shaking her head, pleased by Mataro’s determined reaction but just as surprised as the rest of them. She definitely hadn’t put him up to this, it was his own idea. So this was the path he had chosen. Mataro continued, “I need some cash to buy a treadmill and a weight set.”

Despite herself, Satsuki’s lips formed into a soft smile.

Chapter End Notes

Also please do try to forgive my appalling typos every time I go through this I spot something else that makes me cringe. Maybe one day I won't be writing this when I should be sleeping and we can make something that's quality on the first go-round.

In which Mataro's training begins

Chapter Summary

Several short scenes involving different character's reactions to the previous chapter. Includes some only tangentially related stuff too.

Chapter Notes

Well, it was supposed to be 10.5 but instead here I am and it's just as long as everything else I write. Procrastinating on finals, ho!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Right though here,” Shiro said, scanning his fingerprint and watching as the doors to the Kamui’s dimly lit containment room slid open. The light spilling in from the life fiber-holding pods threw a stark light onto the odd operating table-like apparatus in its center. Uzu squinted for a minute until he could see the outfit, stretched out across the table.

“Alright, I’ll admit it, this is pretty cool dude,” Uzu said with an appreciative whistle as he entered the containment room. The doors started to close behind them, but before they did, he turned back and called, “Well, you coming? Sheesh, yer like a stray dog!”

Nonon gave a little squeak and hurried up. She’d been following behind at what she’d mistakenly believed would be a comfortable distance; why, she wasn’t sure. It just didn’t feel right that he see Saiban without her there. Only Satsuki, Ryuko, and the scientists had done that (it didn’t occur to Nonon that that was the full list of people who’d even been in the secret lab). She caught up and was about to offer a retort when Shiro launched into some babbling explanation.

“Now, as you can clearly observe there are large parts missing, we are currently in the process of re-stitching all the fabric layers in the shape of Nonon’s genetic code, everything except the core framework will eventually be replaced but we keep the original parts we haven’t replaced yet where they are so that we can make sure everything connects and also to keep the quantum state of the in-progress threads relatively stable...” Uzu wasn’t really listening, studying Saiban was much more interesting. He had surmised that before they started working on it the Kamui was being held in the display case on the wall, and sure it would have looked a little more impressive there rather than splayed out with all those spidery little mechanical arms hanging over it, but he could fill in the blanks just fine. There was no doubt about it, Saiban was a clear upgrade over the previous models. Senketsu had been suitably spiky and intimidating when activated, sure, but it’s base form was... not bad,

really, but raggedy and youthful looking – it could’ve passed for a school uniform after all. On the other hand, Junketsu was radiant, perfectly tailored, exactly the right look for Satsuki. But the old Satsuki, the one that was a monster of her own creation, the one they were trying to grow beyond needing.

Saiban was nothing like that, sophisticated, vibrant, regal but not malevolent. A fitting garment for one who would soon be known the world over, who would become like a goddess on Earth. Maybe it was his shingantsu, maybe it was how much time he’d spent around life-fibers, or maybe the thought that this was *Nonon’s* Kamui – the Nonon who was once *his* Nonon and would be again someday - was making him think stupid things, but Uzu could swear he could feel a radiant energy rising clean and golden from the slumbering consciousness within it. Maybe he was just finally going crazy. They said that happened to anyone who stayed in America too long, after all.

Shiro had left the room. He’d of course noticed that long before Shiro was out the door, but Nonon looked like the unkempt little scientist had stabbed her in the back. Silence filled the containment chamber, along with a sort of pressure that closed up behind Uzu’s ears. He would have loved to attribute that to the Kamui’s presence - the dull, half closed eyes across the patchwork dress staring at him. But that *would* definitely be crazy.

“So, that’s you, huh?” Uzu asked slowly.

“Yup,” Nonon’s answer was terse; she didn’t roll her eyes but from her tone Uzu thought she might as well have. That didn’t matter though, it had been a stupid question. Staring at the Kamui, he thought of plenty of other stupid things to say: *It’s gonna look amazing on you. With this, nobody will even hold a candle to you, not Satsuki, not even Ryuko. Sure, you’ll have to kill some REVOCS cultists, but everyone will see you how you really are.* But that wouldn’t do. Once it would have been easy, or if it were just some other girl, but that didn’t work with Nonon. She’d only laugh at him, or worse, get in his face. Instead, what came out was:

“Since when do you wear green?”

“Shut up,” Nonon replied with a groan. She didn’t fire back with a retort of her own, though. Maybe it made her nervous, there was a lot of responsibility coming with this, after all. Maybe he should remind her how during the war, when they’d been forced to hide in the ruins of Osaka, she’d been the only one who never visibly broke down, never despaired despite her constant bitching. How that was when he realized how special she was. But it just – it didn’t seem right.

“Hey I – I mean, it is pretty cool. Do you think it will be able to fly?”

“How would I know? Doesn’t really matter – so long as it gives me superstrength and speed and bulletproof skin it’ll get the job done.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s true. I just kinda thought, y’know, since you loved flying so much.”

“That’s not what’s important. All that matters is that we crush the REVOCS people or get them to back down before they become a threat to the public.” Uzu was right though, and she had been wondering that anxiously since she first saw Saiban, but there was no use sharing something so earnest with him. It wouldn’t lead anywhere, he was just toying with her now. She wanted to leave, but she couldn’t. Well, she wanted to, but this was *her* room, she couldn’t retreat. And her feet were stuck in place by a kind of sick curiosity about what he would say next.

“Really? I kinda hoped you be having more fun with it. That’s what I’d do. Make the most of it, right?”

“And that’s why I’m doing this, not you. A Kamui is not a tool, I know, but until we solve this problem, I have to think of it that way, and of myself as back to being a soldier.”

“Talkin’ like Satsuki now, I see,” Uzu said with a little more hostility than he meant. Nothing really was wrong with replicating Satsuki – frankly you had to a little bit to get things done sometimes. But he was disappointed, disappointed that Nonon seemed so nervous and down even when she had this truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity right in front of her, disappointed that she wouldn’t even indulge him in a friendly conversation. *What’s going on between us? What do you want from me? I’m not going anywhere, but I just wish I knew.*

“And why not, she’s right.”

“And Mataro too, I suppose.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? “

“You don’t have to do exactly what she wants anymore, you know. She won’t hold it against you.”

“Oho, that’s rich coming from you!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do *you* mean ‘what’s that supposed to mean’? You and I and everyone else all know you only voted no because that’s what *you thought* I wanted you to do!”

“Well yeah, you were the one who suggested I vote! Obviously, that’s what you wanted!”

“That’s what I’m saying! You’re the hypocrite here for saying I shouldn’t vote how Satsuki did!”

“So, you did vote that way for her? If you wanted someone to vote yes, why didn’t you do it rather than try to get me to guess what you wanted?”

“Why would you vote yes, though?”

“What? Isn’t that what you wanted me to do?”

“*Voting yes is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard in my life!*” A slight exaggeration on Nonon’s part, she’d be berating Houka and Shiro about it for weeks, but she got why they’d done it.

“So you admit you would be mad no matter which way I voted?” Uzu wasn’t sure how they’d even started arguing, it just started and all of a sudden, they were shooting back and forth so fast it was all he could do to keep up his end.

“No, obviously not, don’t be stupid!”

“Then what is it?”

“Urgh, look, just think for yourself, is that so hard?”

“How the hell do you know I didn’t think for myself! You clearly have no idea what’s going on in my head!”

“You just told me you were trying to figure out how I wanted you to vote!”

“Yeah, I thought about who I was more okay with disappointing! You should consider yourself lucky I chose you over Ryuko. And y’know maybe I shoulda chose her because I always have a great time hanging out with her and *you’ve* been being a real bitch to me lately!”

“Lately? Well how would you know that if you won’t *fucking return my calls!*” That brought a stunned, slightly panicked expression from Uzu, and Nonon paused from whatever she’d been about to say as he quickly yanked his phone from his pocket.

“... Wait, you’ve been trying to call me?”

“Wha-I-uh, not since you’ve been back. You dropped off the face of the Earth for a while back there! People were wondering where you’d gone, ok?”

“Yeah, I know, I was under orders not to contact anyone but secure numbers, Satsuki and Ira mostly, but if I’d known it was you...,” He scrolled through a list of missed calls, and then turned the phone around to show her, “... Is one of these you?”

“... Yeah, that one,” Nonon pointed to a phone number, “New SD card.”

“Shit...” Uzu said, “Uh, I guess I’m sorry.”

“It’s – it’s ok,” Nonon sighed, and then they lapsed into silence for a moment. Nonon rested her arms on the operating table and plonked her head down on her hands. Normally Uzu found it difficult to guess the thoughts in that pretty little head, but now she seemed... relieved? And embarrassed, definitely embarrassed. He quickly looked away and put his eyes back on the Kamui.

“... This is kinda stupid, huh? Toying with the kid’s future just for... whatever the fuck this shit is we’re doing,” Uzu said, hoping that she would help him define what was going on between them.

“Yeah. It was maybe a little dumb of me. But you just sped up the inevitable, Satsuki was gonna get her way eventually.”

“You think you’re gonna apologize to him?”

“Fuck no! It was still an idiotic idea on his part. And idiotic of Ryuko to go along with it, although that’s hardly off-brand for her.”

“I dunno... honestly, I think he could do it if we really set him down to it.”

“You just see you at his age in him,” Nonon said, and usually something like that would’ve come out in a vitriolic screech, but now it was a neutral observation with a hint of vague amusement. It was the most thrilling sound Uzu had heard in weeks at least.

“Not so. He seems like he really wants to improve and become worthy of it, and he believes he can do it. Back then I just wanted to fight and prove I was the best. The only similarity is the confidence.”

“... Well, you proved you’re the best,” Nonon said, still not looking at him, “Now what?”

“First off, I still never beat Satsuki, and Ryuko’s on a whole other level now.”

“Oh they don’t count. Normal people. And before you say there’s nothing inhuman about Satsuki - I know. But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, no kidding... Hey, what’s it like to fight Ryuko, now that she’s fully awakened? Houka told me you were training with her.”

“It’s like fighting a bear. You can’t hurt her, and she’s a *lot* faster than you’d expect.”

“That’s-heh-that’s a nice analogy. I won’t tell her you said that.”

“I’ve said worse to her face.”

“Fair enough. Well, maybe when you put this on, you’ll be able to catch up.”

“Maybe,” Nonon muttered, still lost in her realization that maybe Uzu did still care and it had been her that had messed things up all along. After another long pause, she said, “...It might try to kill me when I put it on, y’know.”

“What?” Uzu exclaimed, “Kamuis can’t do that, can they?”

“Satsuki nearly died when she put Junketsu on the first time. It tried to crush her. The only way she got through it was by sheer force of will.”

“Yeah, but this a good Kamui, like Senketsu. He didn’t hurt Ryuko, he would never!”

“Shiro didn’t tell you? This is the Kamui that Ryuko’s father was making before he made Senketsu. The one that killed Tsumugu’s sister. They’re trying to make it into the type of Kamui Senketsu was, but it might not work.”

Uzu sprung back from the table. Suddenly the energy he sensed from Saiban took on a totally different aspect; a roaring, seeking, malevolent bonfire. All it would take was one blade of dry grass for it to burn everything down. Crushed to death... what a horrible thing to say. He didn’t want to picture it, but there it was. It was time to leave. Maybe it would be okay. But Uzu didn’t want that thing looking at him anymore.

“That had better not happen. I mean, you’ll find a way to make it work, right?” He said as he turned to go.

“I’ll try.” Nonon said, voice small to keep it from breaking. *He’s worried about me! All this time I thought he didn’t care, and it was my fault all along! God, what an idiot I’ve been. But what am I supposed to do now?*

It was on the Friday after Ryuko and Mataro’s trip to the secret lab that Satsuki found herself staying at the penthouse again. This time it was for a meeting with her research advisor for her dissertation, but that had been early in the morning and now, in the late afternoon, she was merely sitting on the couch in front of the gigantic main TV, drafting up plans for some new police protocol and listening to an audio recording of a sociology paper she would be citing in her research. At this hour the penthouse was usually empty save for the staff, so she was quite surprised when Ryuko leaned over the back of the couch, right in her light.

“Hey, er, sis, what’s up?”

“Oh, Ryuko. I thought you’d be out by now.”

“Nah, not yet, the gang’s gone down the block for dinner. Tonight’s thing is down by campus – some social club hosting a party.” The “gang” were some of Ryuko’s college friends that she had talked into moving into the penthouse. The first night she’d spent there, even with Haruka, the place was so empty and cold she could barely stand it, but it hadn’t been hard to fill in quite a few of the dozens of guest rooms. Now the penthouse buzzed with life, a tight knit crew of kids who crowded around Ryuko like pilot fish to a shark, “But that’s not til eight, so they’ll probably be pregaming there until then.”

“Hmm, I see. Not joining them?” Ryuko was clearly going out sometime that evening before her routine hero work, she was dressed in what Satsuki had come to recognize as her typical party-wear. Her favorite bomber jacket had been replaced tonight by a heavy, slightly frayed green-tan jacket with lots of pockets and a canvassy look – it looked like army surplus to Satsuki. Beneath that she had nothing but a low-cut white tank top which Satsuki was *not* looking at. Same short navy-blue skirt and loose white trainers as always, though.

“Sure, eventually. But actually, since you’re here I kinda wanted to talk to ya, if you aren’t too busy.”

“I think I can make time for that,” Satsuki patted the couch as though trying to coax a dog to sit on it, and Ryuko vaulted over the back in one smooth motion, settling in lightly as though she weighed less than a feather.

“Les put somethin’ on,” She muttered to herself, scrolling on her phone for a moment before flicking up and throwing her selection up onto the TV screen. It clicked on and immediately began the opening credits of a movie, evidently some kind of action-adventure flick. It seemed to have a feudal Japan setting, which Satsuki could appreciate. “You ever seen this one before?” Ryuko asked, leaning back casually.

“No, I can’t say I have,” Satsuki said, setting the binder she’d been writing in down on the coffee table and taking off her headphones. “But didn’t you want to talk?”

“Sats, c’mon. We both know if I didn’t distract you first, you’d keep right on working and miss half the shit I said.”

“You’ve got me there,” Satsuki said with one of her signature hum-chuckles. Once, she had claimed that she could keep multitasking through a movie, but after trying it she found it just wasn’t the same. Even though Ryuko and her did usually end up talking over the movie anyway. “I guess I’m done with work for the moment,” She turned to Ryuko, and waited for her to ask away.

“Did I do something ta piss you off?” Ryuko launched right into it, “Like, at Uzu’s party or somethin’? Cuz it’s been real hard to get ahold of you lately. But like I don’t think I blacked out or did anything too bad. Did I say something stupid to some important guest, like maybe those Australian dudes?” The concern was evident in Ryuko’s voice – it had been three weeks since this started, and she was beginning to get really worried. *So, you have noticed. I’m sorry Ryuko, I didn’t mean for this to hurt you. But I can’t tell you that staying away is the less painful option. Or maybe it’s just less painful for me, maybe I’m just being selfish. I don’t know. If only I could just trust myself. If only I could just tell you. But you’d be so disgusted if you found out. It might be selfish, but I couldn’t take that.*

“Oh, no no Ryuko it’s nothing like that!” She exclaimed, “I’m so sorry, it’s just all this work. It’s been terribly busy lately.” *Yes, thank God for the work. It’s always there, never done, never judges, never asks hard questions.* “I’m afraid there’s not much I can do about it.”

“Oh, phew, that’s a relief. Ya had me scared there!”

“I didn’t mean to, really. It was thoughtless of me. Next time things get busy, I’ll tell you, I promise.”

“Nah, don’t sweat it. It sucks but now that I know it’s just the work,” Ryuko said with a dismissive wave of the hand. *Did she buy it? She seems to have. If she’s convinced I’m not angry with her, that’s enough. But she should know I could never stay angry with her.*

“Honestly, I was worried about it back with – y’know Mataro’s thing, at the place? Can I say that?” Ryuko asked a little more casually, now that her main fear had been assuaged.

“Yes, that’s vague enough.”

“Cuz I was thinking like you might be takin’ something out on me, and that wouldn’t be fair to him. Not askin’ you to rethink your decision, and now I know that wasn’t what was going on. But like, I just wanted to make sure.”

“No, that had nothing to do with it. Although I’m sorry for making you worry, too. I didn’t want to crush his dreams, foolish though they are, but at the same time I couldn’t put him in danger.”

“Yeah, I understand that.”

“And I’m not upset with you for that either, you know. Sticking up for him.”

“Oh – oh yeah okay good. I’m not either. Stupid thing to fight over.”

“Well, it is a serious matter.”

“No, it totally is. I’m still a little disappointed. But it’s not wrong to disagree, so I don’t blame any of you.”

“Good, and I -,”

“Except Nonon, she can get fucked,” Ryuko cut in with a halfhearted screed, “Cuz all she thinks is that he’s just a punk kid who can’t handle it, not tryin’ to protect him at all.”

“That’s not true. If anything, she takes the risk even more seriously than the rest of us.”

“Yeah, sure.” The opening credits on the movie were long since over by this point, and they quieted down so they’d have some general idea what was going on.

“There’s a selfish part of me that wishes I was the one to suggest it,” Satsuki said after a few minutes, hum-chuckling at her own foolishness.

“Wait, hold on what? You’ve gonna have to explain that one.”

“I still wouldn’t want it to actually go through, of course. But it’s always me who has to be the nag, the ‘no fun’, ‘no, you can’t’ one. I’ve done enough of that, haven’t I?”

“Aww, Sats that’s not true! You’re tons of fun! Besides, he came to me because he found out about it through me, that’s all. So like it was the specific situation.”

“Yes, well I would have had a responsibility to turn it down then if I’d been the one he came to. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Now that’s just negative thinking, Sats. At least, I think that’s what that’s called. Anyway, you don’t hafta do anything you don’t wanna. I had my doubts too, you know. But I went through with it anyway, because I wanted to help him.”

“Hmm, I only wish it were so simple,” Satsuki said breezily, but Ryuko gave her a sad look that told her that had come off more down than she meant. After another pause while a fight scene happened (with Satsuki’s knowledge of various martial arts she quickly deduced that the actors had no idea what they were doing), she asked, “Why did you help him, then? Because you said you had doubts.”

“Well, it’s what he wanted, I felt like I should help.”

“And that’s good of you, I – that’s what a big sister should do. See that’s what I mean, I’d like to be the cool big sister who encourages him sometimes.”

“Sats that can totally be arranged though! If you’re having trouble thinking of things he’d like to do I can help you with that.”

“Maybe, but that’s besides the point. I just thought you’d have a much stronger reaction, because you’ve been so adamant you want a normal life. You have to admit, it’s *nowhere* near normal.”

“That’s not what he wants, y’know? Like, he’s gotta live his own life. And it’s better than him just joining the army, you’ve gotta admit. Although I don’t *really* think he’d do that.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“But also, it’s like I said once, I’m gonna have to get involved again. There’s gonna be some kind of problem only someone like me can solve,” Ryuko said, keeping it vague both so no one listening could conclusively prove what she was talking about and because she wasn’t entirely sure what kind of problems there would be. “When that happens, I just thought I’d appreciate it if I were surrounded by friends and family, right?”

“I suppose so,” Satsuki said, “And you’re alright with that?”

“Heh, alright is a strong word,” Ryuko replied, “But I guess at this point I’ve accepted that I’m not getting away from it. I’ll just have to squeeze in a little normal life in between all the drama that happens.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought, haven’t you?”

“Oh, much more than I’d want, believe me,” Ryuko said with a chuckle, “I’ve got lots of other more fun stuff to occupy myself with. But it’s kinda important.”

“Well, I’m glad you see it that way, because I’m sure we will need you one day,” Satsuki said, then, “What does that mean to you - ‘normal life’? I’ve never asked.”

“Oh, just the sort of stuff everyone wants, I’m sure. Nice little house someplace, a career or at least something to keep busy with, married, probably, having everyone over for

the holidays, y’know.”

“Married?” Satsuki said with a curious smile and a sudden pang in her chest. *How can she talk about that so casually?*

“Well yeah, if I met the right person.”

“And – uh – do you think Haruka’s right?”

“I – honestly I dunno,” Ryuko said, and it was indeed the truth. She could see it, she could put up with her without much trouble at all. It might even be nice – Haruka’s dream was to be a mangaka, but not just any old sketcher, *the* mangaka who everyone would agree told stories that were real art, not just frivolity – and Ryuko could see them with a messy little studio with lots of big bright windows. Coming in with breakfast in the morning. Getting a halfhearted scolding about getting crumbs everywhere. She could be happy with that. But there was so much else in the world. And it wasn’t *perfect*. Perfection was unattainable, at least for her. “Look, I’m not rushing into anything on that one. Gotta make sure she can handle me, right? Like the whole ‘at my worst’ thing? Because let’s face it I can be a real monster sometimes,” She said with a chuckle.

“Really.”

“Nah I’m just playin’, c’mon. Seriously though, I think it’s too early on to say.”

“Yes, perhaps,” Although Satsuki didn’t like or understand all this trepidation from Ryuko’s about her feelings. After all, she knew her own feelings, right? Maybe not, but that was her fault for being a deviant, not how it should be. So, she said something to force Ryuko’s hand, “But you – you love her, right?”

C’mon, why’ve you gotta ask me that? I don’t even want to know the answer. “She’s great -sweetest, nicest girl I know – but to be honest I -,” Ryuko cut herself off.

“Yes?”

“- I’m not sure yet,” Another noncommittal answer, more dissatisfaction for Satsuki. But at that same moment, looking at the warm, calm smile on Satsuki’s face – she looked happy just to be with Ryuko, and that was enough – Ryuko knew that the real answer was no.

“Well, I suppose there’s no reason to rush. I certainly won’t tell you to when I have no plans for that myself. In fact, I doubt I’ll ever be married.”

Ryuko looked at her sadly again, “Man, you really need to get laid.”

“Oh no, it’s not that. It’s just, with everything that happened with Junketsu... It’s not very good conversation, I’m afraid.”

“Oh yeah, Mako told me a little about that. It’d be rough to remember it, I’m sure. Hey, if you ever want to talk to me about it -,”

“- No, it’s alright. It’s over. Wait, you don’t remember when you were under its control?”

“Nope! Not one bit, except the bit Mako saw – I can kinda see that, but it’s fuzzy.”

“Well, consider yourself lucky then.”

“Sure,” Ryuko said, and dropped the matter when it was clear Satsuki didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“... And what about children?” Satsuki asked after another long pause. Ryuko shot up in her seat with an uncomfortable smile.

“Huh?”

“Children. You didn’t mention it before.”

“Seriously? I – I mean, I wouldn’t even know where to begin!”

“Well, let’s say you did meet the right person. Would that be something you’d want? I mean, it’s no big deal – everybody knows Houka and Shiro have no intention of adopting or anything.”

“I don’t know Sats, really I don’t have any idea. On the one hand, that’s a whole other deal than getting married. Like, it’s different for them, nobody has any expectations because they’re so focused on their work.”

“Well, nobody has any expectations of you either. Er, I don’t mean that in the bad way. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do don’t sweat it.”

“And as far as the rest of the world is concerned you could do basically whatever you want, you know. We’re not like most dynasties, nobody’s expecting heirs. And you in particular, you could just about get away with anything.”

“Sure, but honestly, I’ve barely thought about it,” This was the truth, too. The first time it had even occurred to her she’d be staring at Sukoyo’s cat late one night during that last week before she started college, missing Mako and missing Senketsu even more. Right before she finally managed to fall asleep, she was musing about how Sukoyo sometimes seemed to love that cat more than her natural children, let alone her adopted ones, and – *Holy shit that could be me one day! I could be someone’s mom!* That realization filled her with the same panic worrying about her future always did, stronger even than usual. How was this even possible? Someone should have noticed that she couldn’t be trusted to be a mom, hell, she was about to become an ordinary adult, and nobody’d stopped her yet. If Senketsu were still here, this wouldn’t be a problem at all – he was the half who’d gotten all the nurturing instincts. She couldn’t even keep a goldfish alive.

“That’s alright, I was just curious.”

“Like I didn’t even think it’d ever be possible – until like, what, a year ago I thought I was gonna be a washed-up punk coasting off dad’s money for my whole life.”

“I can understand that. I’d always assumed that – if I even survived – I wouldn’t be able to get the story out and I’d be hunted for murdering Ragyo until authorities caught me.”

“Yeouch, that’s fuckin dark Sats. But like, if this is the kind of problems we have now that’s a good thing, right? I mean, if I’d known that it would turn out like this, I don’t think I’d have been so angry all the time back then.” *Being real, the only thing I really regret is that Senketsu is gone – not like that’s not a big deal. Oh, and that I had to find out this one’s my sister. But what the hell, so long as she’s still here, that’s enough, right?*

“Hmm, and wouldn’t that have been nice for me... It really did change everything, didn’t it?”

“Well yeah, what did you expect? Still, it’s kind of odd to think that – if any of our gang does have kids – we’ll be telling them stories about Honnouji, huh? War stories, like. They’ll never fully get it, but then that’s good too, right?”

“That’s why it’s so important we take care of our adversaries now, so that they don’t have to live like we did.”

“I hear ya. Although being real, any of our kids would be for sure strong enough to take whatever life throws at them.”

“Oh really?” Satsuki asked playfully, “Even Nonon’s?”

“Would they inherit the weird hair thing? I mean, they probably did genetic tests on ‘er.”

“I don’t know. It’s supposed to be incredibly rare. Maybe it’s a recessive trait. But you’re dodging the question.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll throw you for a loop here, you ready? I think she’d be a good mom.”

“Really? I do too.”

“Yeah, god she’d be such a nag, I can see it now. But they’d get their homework done on time.”

“I think so too, but you know, I just can’t picture it. I have an easier time imagining you with children, actually.”

“Seriously?”

“What, is that so strange?” Satsuki had a clear mental image of it. They’d be little monsters – obviously there was more than one – and even Ryuko would have trouble keeping control of them. But they’d be adorable little monsters; same unruly black hair, same toothy grin, same bold blue eyes.

“I mean, I can see it... but nah,” Ryuko shook her head. “I’d be a shit mom.”

“Oh, you sell yourself too short. You know what I think?”

“No, what?”

“I think if you had half as much faith in them as you have in Mataro you’d do an exceptional job.”

“Yeah, well, a lot of good that did. Er, not to reopen that book.”

“Oh, I don’t know, you might be surprised.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You spoke for him, before, but now he’ll have the chance to represent himself.”

“You’re really not gonna be more specific than that, huh?” Ryuko said, and though she should probably have been mad that Satsuki hadn’t been up-front with her she felt excited. It was like Satsuki was giving her a present. Satsuki always gave the best presents. She always knew what people wanted.

“No. But worry not, you’ll see if anything comes of it.”

“That’s alright,” Ryuko said with a happy chuckle, sliding a little closer. “Wouldn’t be Satsuki if you didn’t have some secret project,” She said wistfully, “I’m looking forward to seeing the results.”

“See, look how you’re smiling now! That’s what I meant – that’s why you’d be an excellent mom.”

“Aw,” Ryuko went a little red. “Why can’t you go embarrass someone else!” She joked.

“You just make it too easy.” At this point, Ryuko hushed her up for a while because a good part was starting. The movie was good, Satsuki had to admit – there were surprisingly deep themes about conflicting loyalties that she found resonant – and she was almost surprised when the afternoon had been whiled away and Ryuko powered down the TV.

“Alright, I’m off. That was a lot of fun, Sats – just what I needed after this fucking week,” She said as she stood to go.

“Yes, thank you for showing me that film, I’ll admit I was impressed. At times.”

“No you goof I meant our little chat! I like talkin’ to ya, y’know?”

“Oh I – I appreciate that,” Satsuki said with a heart-melting smile.

“I feel like I can be real with you, y’know? You get me.”

“Well, what are sisters for?”

“True enough.”

“Although, I think I must apologize – I’m not going to be able to be the kind of sister you want, not always, anyway,” Satsuki intoned sadly. For though she too had loved talking to Ryuko, she couldn’t ignore the unusual burning in her chest that had been growing throughout the conversation. It felt like she was in some strange new place, everything seemed surreal and cramped. The only solution would’ve been to get closer, that’s what the burning told her, but there was only so close she could get. For a moment she really did contemplate finishing that apology by saying, *because I’m in love with you*, and letting that be the end of it. She’d never again be able to spend such a pleasant afternoon with her, but she’d be rid of the burning feeling.

“What, because of the work? Aw Sats don’t beat yourself up, it’s okay! You’re doing really important things out there, and that does matter. It’s like I said before, we’ll fit in the good times between all this mess, right?”

“Right.”

“And besides, anything you gotta do so Hououmaru doesn’t kill you when she gets out is worthwhile.”

“Ah yes, thanks for reminding me.”

“Hey, that’s important too.”

“Hmm. Can’t argue with that.”

“Alright, well, goodbye Sats, hopefully I see you soon.”

“Take care, Ryuko,” Satsuki called back, and Ryuko opened the door onto the patio and was gone. The white marble walls of the penthouse glittered in the evening light like ice.

Mataro was bubbling with excitement as the chauffeured sedan deposited him in front of Uzu’s new dojo. The dojo itself wasn’t new at all – an old, traditional building with walls of wood and stucco and well-maintained gardens, it looked out of place amongst the monotonous, blocky condos of outer Tokyo. What was new was Uzu’s ownership of it. Technically it was a partnership with another Kendo master he met on his travels, a master who realized two things: that the unbeatable young martial artist who was also one of the Heroes of Honnouji deserved a fitting dojo, and also that it would be very profitable to go into business with him.

Inside, the dojo was also quite well decorated, with a wide-open practice floor, a large, bubbling fountain with koi, and racks with a variety of weapons besides the traditional shinai all across the walls. It was also quite empty, official classes and open practice wouldn’t start until the afternoon. Mataro had gotten excused from school today just so he

could come in for his private lessons bright and early. It was cool to be there on his own so early, not as cool as the fact that he was there to learn sword fighting but still. In most families as the youngest he would be the last of the kids to learn how to drive a car, but instead he was the last one to learn sword fighting. Sure, Mako's was more whacking people with a baseball bat, but she had good technique, so it counted. Either way, even if he couldn't persuade them to let him wear a Kamui, he was still psyched. But where was Uzu? Mataro considered shouting out for him, but before he did a voice rang out like a bell and froze him in his tracks.

"Mankanshoku!" He knew even before he turned around that it could be nobody else. Before him, adorned in a plain white gi and faded navy blue hakama, was none other than Satsuki. *Ah shit she looks pissed. Why is she here? I thought she was okay with this. That's a look I haven't seen on her face in a long time.*

"Oh, uh, hey Satsuki. Do you – do you train with Uzu often? This is my first time here. It's pretty neat, gotta say. Do you uh, do you know where he is?"

"Uzu is in his shingantsu chamber," She said curtly with a nod to a door on the far end of the practice floor. "Meditating. He won't be joining us for today's lesson."

"Wait. Hold on. You -,"

"What's the matter? Were you expecting a world kendo master?"

"Ah, no, it – it's fine, really."

"Well perhaps you would be interested to know that I am the only one he has not yet defeated. Only I have mastered a method of complete bodily control that makes it all but impossible for him to predict my movements using either tengantsu or shingantsu," She said proudly.

"I'm sorry, sorry I – um," Satsuki seemed determined to put him on the backfoot, channel her old self to intimidate him away. But she was his adopted sister now, and he was sure it was all just some sort of elaborate test, "Can you teach me it?"

"Can you learn it?"

"I don't know."

"Then no."

"Wait, wait. What I meant was that I will try my best. Is that alright?"

"Better. So, you wish to learn what the elites and I learned on our mission? I'm sure I needn't say *why* you want this."

"Yes, yes. Please, I'm sorry about before. Please teach me."

"Don't apologize!" Satsuki shouted, and threw two objects across the practice floor to him. A Shinai and a black cloth blindfold. Mataro instinctively reached for the bamboo

sword first. “No,” Satsuki reprimanded him, “Blindfold first”. While he complied, tying a nice snug knot right below the braid in his still growing hair, she continued, “Uzu will endeavor to teach you shingantsu – you cannot learn tenganstu without his unique eyes, but with appropriate training anyone can develop their other senses, their oneness with the world, their mind’s eye. He will begin tomorrow, but for today you will make the first step.”

“Sounds good. Ready,” He said as solidly as he could. *Holy shit, shingantsu! This is fucking awesome. I’m sorry I doubted you, Satsuki.*

“No. You are not. Stand up straight, up now,” He complied – he’d barely even realized he’d been slouching, “Several things need to be made clear between us.”

“Uh, okay.” Now that Mataro couldn’t see her, she allowed herself a grim smile. *So, it seems I’ve still got it. I can still bring the monster out. Maybe a little too easily, but that’s a matter for another time. Mataro knows I’d never really kill him – otherwise he’d have run screaming a long time ago.* He was turning to face her as she paced, trying his best get used to relying on his ears.

“One! When we are here, we are no longer brother and sister, Mataro and Satsuki. You are Mankanshoku, I am Kiryuin. I am not here to teach you, but to strike you down. You are just a boy with aspirations too big for him – I will show you the depths of your error.”

“Okay,” He nodded. *Whoa. It’s like a movie.* His hands were trembling, “I won’t let you defeat me, I’ll learn anyway.”

“Two! There is only one possible ending here: you *will* fail. There is no way I will allow you to realize your ambition.” *Oh.* “If you were to succeed, it would only be by becoming better than any of us. But that is impossible.” *So there’s a chance, she’s just toying with me. I knew it would be hard - the hardest thing I’d ever done - she’s just trying to make me realize that.* Mataro had to believe that.

“Three!” She shouted even louder, and not from where Mataro had been expecting. He jumped a little. “If you *ever* remove that blindfold, that will be the sign that you have given up. Your lessons will be over -,”

“- Wait, what?”

“Are we clear?”

“Hold on a moment!”

“**Are we clear?**” Satsuki boomed, somehow only a few feet in front of his face by the sound of it. Mataro felt like he could sense a pressure radiating off her into the air. It was terrifying

“I – yes? I guess?”

“Good. Let’s begin,” Satsuki said, voice harder than ever, and before Mataro even knew what was happening her shinai connected with his temple and sent him sprawling to the ground. Things didn’t get any easier from there.

Chapter End Notes

In all seriousness this one was tough to write. Lots of characterization which it's easy to feel like you've done wrong. If you feel like I'm being confusing or messing it up let me know.

In which Ira makes a breakthrough

Chapter Summary

You probably didn't expect me to follow up on this random prisoner subplot, did you?
Well, here's ~3,000 words about it!

Chapter Notes

I've decided I'm not gonna do that thing with a bunch of short moments wrapped up into one chapter anymore, they all get a chapter of their own so I can push 'em out faster. Also means each one can be a little longer, since I was setting myself a ~2,000 word limit on each one the last time, which is both a good and a bad thing.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

August, 2065

“Your lunch, Itsuki,” Ira nodded curtly, opening and closing the door to the cell with a curt nod and a sterile plastic tray in hand. The prisoner who had attempted to assassinate Satsuki at the press conference glared back at him. He’d put on some weight during his stay, a product of the greasy foods he tended to demand from them, but since he’d been thin to begin with, he wound up looking quite a lot healthier than when his internment had begun. Aside from that, however, not much had changed; he had stopped shouting obscenities at Ira the moment he entered the room, but the only information he’d given was that Itsuki (the name from his phony ID) was his actual first name, which wasn’t especially helpful because it was quite a common name, but Houka eventually tracked him down. That wasn’t of much use either, unfortunately – he’d trawled through the old REVOCs data they’d taken from Ragyo’s tower, but they’d used codenames for everyone who was involved in the cult and puzzling out who was who took some time. “As requested, fried fish, takoyaki, pork dumplings, and miso. How are you today?”

“How am I? How do you think I am?” Itsuki groaned, hardly looking up from where he reclined across his bed, “I’m bored! All I’ve got is this TV and these books!” He gestured to his desk, the flatscreen and stacks of DVDs and novels on it looked like they hadn’t been touched in a while, but Ira did take them all out twice everyday and give them to a team of technicians to make sure they weren’t tampered with in any way. “If you’re gonna just keep me here forever could I at least get some games or something?”

“The always-online limit on most consoles makes them a violation of our network security policy. I *could* have someone look into making an offline model, but it would take a while. You’ll just have to make do for now,” Hearing that, Itsuki scrunched up his face and scoffed like a disgruntled teenager. “I’m. Sorry.” Ira said through gritted teeth.

He wasn’t sorry. It would take Houka all of three minutes to build the prisoner an offline VR console, but why should he? Ira had asked Satsuki if she would just assign Itsuki to someone else – he knew himself well enough – but she was as careful as ever about keeping the truly important secrets amongst the smallest number of people possible. It had to be him. But there were days when he didn’t know if he could even speak to the would-be assassin, if he could even stop himself from beating him within a minute of his pitiful life. What kind of world was it where he had to talk to a madman who’d attempted to murder Lady Satsuki – want it or not she was the only one who deserved the title – every damn day.

One had to wonder why she was so determined to see this oddly soft-hearted plan through. If they’d taken Nui or Hououmaru or someone prisoner back then, would they have received the same merciful treatment? Of course not. It made sense considering her hopes of turning over a new leaf, but that could wait. The fight wasn’t over yet. They could get soft when it was done. Maybe she was getting tired, looking into the future and seeing that the fight might not be over for a long time and just wanting to be done with it. Maybe, but that was the antithesis of everything he’d ever known about Lady Satsuki. Maybe he just didn’t know her that well, really. Or maybe this would really work. Maybe it would’ve worked if someone other than him was implementing it.

At least it was just a few minutes out of his day, and in the end maybe it was better than the alternative. At least this way when Mako asked how his day was he didn’t have anything reprehensible to hide. But Ira knew that if the order came down that he was to torture Itsuki, he’d start the waterboarding with a certain amount of relief.

It didn’t help that he was such an unbearable asshole.

“Ugh! C’mon, you gotta give me somethin’!” He whined, glaring at Ira challengingly. *It’s almost as if he’d rather torture to this, maybe because that would at least confirm him in his belief that we’re the evil ones. I guess that denying him that is how this is supposed to crack him.*

“Well, think of something without internet and you can have it. But you know, if you’re really that bored, I can think of a way you could potentially shorten your stay.”

“Go to hell.”

“Will there be anything el – oh,” Ira interrupted himself as his phone started ringing. He dug it out to see a contact photo of Mako with an open-mouthed laughing grin, much too close to the camera. He was about to text that he was busy, but then he remembered one bizarre instruction that Satsuki had given him: *it’s okay to answer your phone in front of him if it’s part of our inner circle. In fact, I’d recommend it.*

“Mako! How are-,”

“Iiiiiiaaaaa!” Mako shouted into the phone exuberantly, not at all worried about seeming impolite. Truth be told, Ira found it oddly endearing when she interrupted him. Most people were too intimidated to do that, “Big news!”

“Oh? What could that be?” Ira responded with a chuckle.

“I passed all my finals! I got the scores back and looks like they aren’t kicking yours truly out just yet!”

“Excellent! All those late nights paid off.”

“Yu-huh. And thaaanks for staying up with me, even though you’re *soooo* wicked busy,” Emphasis hers, Ira made a point of never complaining about work around Mako. She refused to be burdened by such things, and it was nice sometimes to allow himself that too.

“No need to thank me, it was my plea -,”

“But wait! That’s not the big news!”

“Wait, what? But I thought-,”

“Nah, nah, I saw the craziest thing online today! Ryuko and Satsuki are on Dragonball!”

“Huh?”

“I’m not kidding! In the new season they made characters that are, like, exactly based on them! They changed the names and all but you can tell it’s them. Ira we have to watch it!”

“That show’s still on the air?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Isn’t it like eighty years old by now?”

“I dunno, probably.”

“Some things never change, do they?”

“Now, look, I know it’s dumb and normally you would never, but do you think just this once...”

“Oh, no, I completely agree. That’s something we ought to see. I’ll pick up some ice cream on the way home, we’ll make a night of it.”

“Yus! Yus yus yus yus,” Mako sounded like she was melting on the other side of the phone. Ira started to break from chuckling to full blown laughter, and for a moment he was aware of Itsuki’s eyes boring into him with a mixture of contempt and confusion.

“Er, one question: what is this show about? Is it bad that I don’t know?”

“Spikey hair?”

“Oh good, you don’t know either.”

“Nuh-uh! It’ll be a little adventure!”

“Sounds fun. Well, if that’s it, I’ll be-,”

“Actually,” Mako said, slightly more serious sounding, “I did have something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Oh?”

“It’s pretty important... maybe I’ll just wait ‘til you get home.”

“Well now I really want to know what it is,” Ira said, also dropping to serious. *There’s not many things she could be asking about this way. Shit, I don’t think I forgot a condom anytime recently, but you can never be too sure.* Most girls would have started out with a question like that, rather than finals and TV. But Mako wasn’t most girls.

“Okay, fine... Ira, can we get a dog?”

“A – a dog?” He breathed a sigh of relief that also helped hide how totally off guard that took him.

“A big dog! Cuz I’ve had Guts, like, since I was little but he’s just a little thing. I wanna get like big ol’ shepherd or a hound-dog or a terrier!”

“I think a terrier is a small dog.”

“Ira can we? Please?”

“Of course, but where would we put it? They need lots of room to run, you know.”

“We could buy a house!”

“A-a house?”

“Yeah, we’ll just ask Satsuki for the cash! She won’t mind unless we get too fancy.”

“Sure, but, well, don’t you think that’s moving a little fast?”

“You-you don’t want to get a house with me?”

“That is not at all what I meant.”

“Hmmm... Okay! Maybe it is better if we talk about it tonight though.”

“Maybe. Well, if that’s all, I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay! Goodbye! I love you!”

“I love you too,” He said, and hung up. How amazing was it that those four simple words were so easy to say now? They’d nearly choked in his mouth the first time. He gave Itsuki one glance and, not seeing any change in his expression, turned to go.

“You really are a monster,” Itsuki spat suddenly.

“Excuse me?” Ira turned back around, looming over the prisoner where he sat. Itsuki instinctively curled his arms over his chest for protection, but he was undeterred.

“You gonna marry that girl, huh?”

“Well, I was pla-,”

“You ever gonna tell her how many people you’ve killed? How many people you’ve ordered killed without even seeing them? The horrible things you did at *that place*? You think she’d still marry you if she knew? You think she’d still say, ‘I love you’, if she did?” Here he did an impossibly annoying imitation of Mako, “Of course not, but do you care? Why can’t you just admit it, you people are vultures!”

That was it.

“For your information, she already knows. Better than you ever will. That ‘girl’ is Mako Mankanshoku – yes, you know that name – she was there the whole time. She *saw* me beat and kill people.”

“So, she’s a monster too. Good. You deserve each other.”

“Is that what you think?” Ira’s hands were shaking. He could just *not* allow this man, or anybody else, to believe that about Mako. It was even worse than when someone insulted Lady Satsuki. He’d never felt this fiercely before. “You couldn’t be more wrong. She was a no-star. She *mouthed off to me*, multiple times. I could have even ordered her killed, and I would have been none the wiser. But you know what? She wasn’t afraid. She would never hurt a fly – just one time we coerced her into fighting Ryuko, and she couldn’t bring herself to land the finishing blow – but she stood up to me anyway. Nobody else would dare, not even Ryuko when she didn’t have her Kamui. But she didn’t care. She knew somehow I wouldn’t kill her, not if she was *right*.”

“No. You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie! Unless you confess you aren’t leaving this prison until the day you die! Who cares what you think! No, what I’m saying is the truth. I was a monster, you can’t hurt me with that. But she saw something in me – what, I may never know – maybe that I did have my own code of honor, maybe that if I had a choice, I wouldn’t be doing this, maybe just she likes very muscular men, who knows. But she knew somehow that I could be better than that. And now that it’s all over with I have the chance to prove her right. But no matter what, you need to believe that she’s not like that. Because she’s the most remarkable woman I know, and I know Lady Satsuki and Ryuko, pretty high bar. And if you can’t see that, then you really are fucked in the head for good.” Rant over, Ira tried to reign himself back into

control. He didn't realize how white his knuckles had gotten, gripping onto the metal footboard. Itsuki looked like he didn't even know how to process what he'd just heard.

"I'll be going now," Ira said with a terse shake of his head. Nobody would ever know what he'd just said, so nobody would ever be able to tell if it was good or bad. But it felt good. He'd had to do it.

"Wait!" Itsuki suddenly burst out. "I thought of something I want."

"Yes?"

"A chess set."

"I'll bring one down tomorrow."

"Thank you." *Whoa. That's a first.* Ira was at the door now. He was about to knock to let the guards outside know he was coming out, when Itsuki spoke again. "I'll need someone to play with too."

"Will you now?"

"She said you were at my beck and call, didn't she? C'mon, I thought I was important or something, you don't have time to play one game of chess?" *Still an asshole though, I guess.*

"I'll see what I can do," Ira said with his trademark officiality, but as he left the cell, he somehow found himself smiling. *Holy shit that worked? **That** did the job? Lady Satsuki is gonna have a field day.*

He arrived at his and Mako's apartment that night with a huge bouquet and several gallon tubs of ice cream.

As per his schedule, Ira arrived at 6 a.m. the next morning with Itsuki's breakfast (waffles and strawberries) and the chess board. The prisoner didn't seem too eager to see him at first, but after he'd eaten, he quickly cleared off his desk and set things up. He sat on the bed, Ira hunching his broad shoulders over the desk chair. He went first. They were well into the game before either of them spoke.

"So how many people have you killed, then? Just out of curiosity."

"You think I'm going to just tell you that?" Ira was doing his best to keep cool and casual, as much as that was possible. The fact that he was finally so close to the breakthrough that Satsuki's new, gentle method of imprisonment had promised was motivation enough to keep him temper under control.

"C'mon, weren't you the one who said I was never getting out of here? Believe me, I've given up on escape by now."

“... I believe the total came out around one hundred-fifteen, just for how many I killed myself. Most of those were during the tri-city raid. But I probably ordered the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands. It’s difficult to count because many no-stars died of their wounds from No-Tardies days after the fact, and at times we leveled sections of the Hono-town slums that were getting too overgrown and nobody kept track of how many people were living there.”

“Oh. That’s not quite as many as I thought.”

“It’s a lot.”

“And that’s all necessary sacrifices, huh?”

“Maybe, maybe not. The world seems to have decided they were. We could have done things better, but we had a lot to manage. And the Goku uniforms, they sort of exert this influence on you, make you more aggressive. Sometimes it didn’t even feel like it was me doing it.”

“Ohh, so it’s the Goku uniforms’ fault, huh?”

“I didn’t say that, but still. I’m sure you don’t care to hear this, but they are evil creatures by nature.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Itsuki said smugly, and very quickly and confidently made a move that left one of his bishops completely exposed. It took Ira two turns to notice and capitalize on it.

“I will.” They played on in silence for a while.

“So, Mankanshoku’s the little brown-haired chick who adopted Mato, huh?”

“That’s the one.”

“How’s that workin’ out?”

“You mean the adoption, or?”

“Not the adoption.”

“... It’s good. We decided we will get the dog.”

“Never had a dog.”

“And we will rent a house in the suburbs, see how we like it.”

“Huh. And uh, how is she? Just out of curiosity,” The prisoner asked slyly.

“She’s doing well.”

“No, like, y’know, how is she,” He chuckled.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“C’mon. Y’know.”

“... Are you trying to get under my skin?”

“I dunno. Maybe,” Ira knew he was, why wouldn’t he be. Uzu or someone similar would have come up with a witty comeback that would have left them both in stitches, but Ira’s wasn’t capable of producing any juvenile retorts. Still, this was progress, even if he hated it, and even if it wasn’t as fast as it could’ve been with someone more charming. He noticed that Itsuki was fiddling with his pieces, picking up a couple of them, moving them back and forth, then putting them down where they started again.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh...” Itsuki looked really stumped, then after a moment he said, “I’m trying to remember how to castle.”

“Is now a good time to castle?”

“Whatever. I’m losing anyway.”

“Well, to castle, you just... uh...”

“You don’t know either, do you.”

“Not as such, no.”

“Oh wow, we both suck at this, don’t we?”

“It would appear so...” Ira said slowly, letting out a little chuckle despite himself.

“Boring game anyway. Next time bring a deck of cards or something.”

“So Mankanshoku, your girl, she the one who broke Ryuko free from Junketsu? I’m right about that, aren’t I?” This was in the second week after Itsuki had first asked for the chess board, and they had cycled through playing cards, checkers, back to chess, and now they were playing Go. Ira knew how to play Go, so this wasn’t so bad.

“That’s right. She succeeded where only she could have.”

“I thought those two were dating, though.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Some tabloid, not too long before I wound up here. Didn’t seem right, though, because they’re like adopted sisters?”

“Well, actually, they were together for a short while. But they parted on good terms when they went to college, been planning on it for a while.”

“Isn’t – isn’t that kind of weird to you, though?”

“Weird is the new normal, haven’t you heard? No, it’s different with them. Ryuko was her first real friend – people actually thought she was mentally unstable back at Honoujji, can you believe that?” He said with an appreciative chuckle.

“Uh, okay...”

“Anyway, it’s only natural that they’d be so close. Even today I doubt I’ll ever be as close to Mako. But that’s alright,” no sense in being jealous at Ryuko for that. No sense in being jealous at her for anything, their lives were so different – both in upbringing and aspirations - that drawing comparisons was just unreasonable. “Hasn’t impacted my relationship with Mako or my friendship with Ryuko.”

“Hmm. You know it’s stupid but part of the reason I doubted it was just Mankanshoku doesn’t look at first glance like the type to be, like, bi or whatever she is. Matoi though, she has the look about her. Tell me, she is a goddess, right?”

“What? Of course not, she’s just a normal young lady.”

“Oh. So she doesn’t have powers like Prophetess Ragyo? I thought I heard somewhere she did.”

“She does, from the life fibers she was fused with. Super-strength and -speed, enhanced senses, regenerative powers, she’s got ‘em all.”

“Oh, then there you go, she’s a goddess.”

“That’s not what a goddess is. I can assure you she’s no more supernatural than you or I. What are you looking so smug for?”

“It’s sort of funny. She can do whatever she wants, right? You can’t be mad she’s closer to your girlfriend than you, can you?”

“I’m not. They’re family.”

“You could never be angry with The Prophetess, either. Goddesses still always get their way, I guess. I was just thinking, doesn’t sound like much has changed out there, after all.”

“Ragyo *killed* people who questioned her. It’s entirely different. I can assure you there are plenty who have disagreed with Ryuko. I don’t, is all.”

“Maybe. Food for thought.”

“Maybe. But have you ever considered how strange it is that Ragyo was completely committed to the life fibers’ will, and Ryuko is the exact opposite? Their powers come from

the same source, don't they? How do you explain that, if she is a goddess? Some food for thought for you."

They played in silence for a while longer. Itsuki was a quick player, he didn't take his time before making a move. He wasn't bad, but he was frequently distracted from the game. As Ira was leaving, he broke the silence again.

"Oh, I thought of something else you could bring."

"Sure. What'll it be?"

"Have you ever heard of *La Chanson de la Couturière*?" Itsuki suddenly had Ira's full attention.

"Harime's book? I'm aware of it," As Grand Couturière, Harime had been something of a high priestess for Ragyo, as well as her premiere producer of new life-fiber devices, personal assassin, and some kind of fucked-up lover. She would've been quite the prodigal young lady, if she hadn't been evil personified. The book itself was something Houka and the other scientists had been bugging Satsuki about for a while – the snippets they had were just insane ramblings, but word had it the complete text had details on all her most secret and monstrous inventions, as well as a complete breakdown of the REVOCS ideology.

That could be helpful, because even after daily conversations with Itsuki Ira still hadn't figured out if they'd been deceived into believing that the Cocoon Sphere was some kind of gateway to heaven, or if they really did understand that all it would've done was reduced the planet to space dust. If they were somehow okay with that, it might make Satsuki's plan to show them that they'd been duped and get them to surrender somewhat difficult.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any copies of it just lying around," Ira said.

"Heh, I figured. Well, what if I told you where you could get your hands on one?"

Ira turned around with a sly half-smile.

"I'm listening."

The next day, Mako and Ira went down to the pound to pick out a dog. They wound up leaving with two.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Itsuki is just a combination of Ira's and Satsuki's names, because this subplot involves the two of them. It is also a relatively common Japanese name, so whatever. Sometimes I think I'm sooo clever.

In which Uzu and Nonon resolve some differences

Chapter Summary

There's really no good reason not to move this subplot along, since the central romance is gonna draaaaag out as I'm sure you're aware. And no good reason not to throw in a bunch of random flavor about the lives of our characters while I'm at it, I guess

Chapter Notes

Woo these chapters are never not gonna be long I guess! I just like writing out every little line of dialogue and have nothing better to do.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

August 2065

“Move up to the command post. Gun box spawning in there in 30,” Houka muttered, calm and detached.

“That’s the big one in the middle?” Uzu asked, dropping his alien avatar down into the trench next to Uzu’s bird-headed monstrosity, momentarily safe from a hail of technicolor lasers flashing overhead. This was *Solar Flare: Warmaster*, one of Houka’s favorite VR shooters, and in what had become a routine since Uzu’s return the two of them were squeezing in a few rounds after evening Kendo classes wrapped up.

“No, that’s just a bunker. Here, I’ll lead, you cover fire,” an oddly cute lizard-man poked its head over a mound of red earth a few yards down – an enemy player – but Uzu’s crosshairs were already on it. It quickly became a bloody stump amid a hail of blue plasma. Everybody was some kind of unusual alien in this game, not like it mattered since they all had to conform to an approximately humanoid shape because there were humans controlling them. But it did help tell at a glance what role everyone was supposed to fill – Uzu was playing as a thing with lots of plate armor and thick, leathery skin who aced breach-and-clear assignments, whereas Houka’s avian fellow was a well-rounded trooper with lots of gadgets, an ideal squad leader. The rest of their squad was dead, again. They didn’t wait up for newbies.

Another lizard guy, a little faster, made it down into the trench. Didn’t save him though, Uzu’s aim was good, his reflexes better. He would have quit the game in self-disgust if he hadn’t been good, he’d seen actual combat, so this should be a cakewalk. Even so, it had been a learning experience at first. Tengantsu didn’t work on a world projected into his eyes

by screens on a helmet. Shingantsu didn't work when his body was back in the console in his apartment, held in place as he sprinted around on a treadmill by a mess of "smart wires" that plugged into the VR body-brace attached to him. But he had gone in for the custom fitting since he didn't have much to do these days when he wasn't at the dojo. As a result, the back brace that ran along his spine was so ergonomic he kept it on while lazing around at home sometimes, the arm and leg bands tracing the backs of his limbs were just the right length, and overall, he didn't even notice the brace and the wires were there. But without his unique abilities he was on the same level as everyone else. Combat training and raw athleticism made him far better than the average player, but he had to admit he was still nowhere near as good as Houka.

"Keep up," Houka said curtly, "They respawn so fast here it doesn't even matter." He had something better than raw skill – knowledge of the game systems and maps. He knew where everything was gonna be before the match even started, exactly what every player in sight was going to do. Uzu wondered where the fun in it was for him. Houka didn't seem too impressed by the dropships blowing up in midair above them, the shockingly realistic alien corpses staining the ground with their purple blood, or any of the other spectacles of this surreal extraterrestrial battlefield that so enraptured him. He just seemed to be trying to see how efficiently he could win. "Don't shoot your grenade launcher in here either, or we'll be fucked."

"I know."

"You remember that one time a tank rolled over us when we were down here, and you shot a grenade at its belly and it bounced off."

"Yeah," Uzu said with a chuckle, "Rubber grenades, eh?"

"This is it," Houka directed them into a shiny synthetic bunker on the edge of the woods, wherein they wasted no time clearing the enemies who had been obliviously staring down their sights in the direction they'd been expecting the attack to come from.

"Okay, this looks like all the other ones."

"No, see how the lights on the panels are red? And three, two, one... There we go," A large crate of weaponry suddenly phased into existence by one of the walls. Uzu moved to check it out, but suddenly a glowing green grenade dropped in front of it. Another enemy was barging through the doorway, late to the party, a hulking close-quarters specialist like Uzu's avatar. It would take more than that to stop him though. With a grunt of exertion, he pushed up and back off the treadmill, transitioning into a full backflip to land atop a computer terminal. Even with the game audio blaring he could hear the smart-wires hard at work, detaching and recoupling at lightning speeds to avoid getting tangled as he contorted his body, as well as pulling him forward so the whole flip ended up happening in place over the treadmill pad. The feeling of his body's motion not lining up with what he was seeing was a little odd, it caused motion sickness in some people, but it didn't stop Uzu from returning fire even before he landed. Taken off guard by the sudden acrobatics – bulky aliens weren't supposed to move like that – the enemy player didn't stand a chance.

"Cool! I call sword!"

“It’s yours, obviously,” Houka was fishing around in the crate, choosing for himself a souped-up laser rifle and a missile launcher. As Uzu brandished his energy sword dramatically one of their squadmates respawned nearby. They tried to tell him to wait a moment, but he grabbed the first gun he saw from the crate and ran off into the forest. “He’s gonna have fun,” Houka said sarcastically.

“What now?”

“Now we hold position in this general area until enough of our teammates push up that we can take the next point.”

“Cool, I’m gonna get choppy down in the tunnels. You want in?”

“Pass. Enemy armor up here to kill. Take a backup weapon though if you’re going it alone? Fusion pistol?”

“Sure, whatever,” Uzu grabbed a pistol from the crate – he did like these, they packed a punch and were great for point blank blasting – and ran off with it in his offhand, leading with his sword the way only he knew how.

“So, how’re you settling in to your new place?” Houka asked as Uzu entered the sewers, methodically disassembling two terrified bird-heads. He saw that Houka had taken them off squad-chat and into private-chat, so they weren’t playing too serious anymore, just talking. This was Uzu’s favorite part, when Houka wasn’t gunning for a particular objective they could just mess around and make conversation.

“s’Okay. Like everything’s great, when Satsuki said she’d take care of me I did not expect her to go so hard. Like have you seen it? I’ve got a bar, the bathtubs basically a jacuzzi, I mean I am livin’!”

“But...”

“But like I *know* I’m gonna end up spending more time over at Ryuko’s anyway. I mean, they’re always up to something.”

“Hmm, so is your complaint that you don’t have a roommate or just general FOMO?”

“I dunno. Both? I feel like the housekeeping gals are judging me for leaving my shit everywhere. I shoulda told Satsuki I didn’t want a maid, but now I can’t fire them...” He whined, aware that he was making too much of something so minor. Houka wouldn’t mind.

“Heh. Foul bachelor lifestyle, huh?”

“Don’t fucking remind me.”

“You know, you should *ask* Nonon about that.”

“Whu. What? About what?”

“Well, she’s living in a big empty penthouse too, y’know. Since Satsuki had her family arrested and tried for human trafficking.”

“No shit. How’d I miss that?”

“It’s no big deal. She didn’t like them much to begin with. I’m just saying she’s in a similar situation. To be honest, I don’t think she likes going back there very much – she spends most of her nights with us, y’know? Must be lonely, hers is even bigger. Us and Satsuki are too busy to spend that much time with her, and she won’t swallow her pride and go hang out with Ryuko. But she probably knows a thing or two about living on her own in a big, fancy house, right?”

“Hmm. Interesting,” truth be told, that was much more than interesting. Uzu would be chewing on that tidbit all night.

“Hey, how fast can you get back up here? It’s a madhouse. Fifteen of our guys showed up and they all brought grenade launchers.”

“But I was just starting to get a good killstreak going!”

“Oh I can assure you there’s plenty to chop up here.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in a mo’.”

Nonon was restless. This was the time of day when, after a long duel with Ryuko, she would return to either her penthouse or her quarters in the lab, shower, and go right to bed. Today, however, Ryuko had decided that she needed to go in to classes. Apparently, she’d missed quite a few this semester and had to at least make an appearance, if only so Satsuki didn’t nag. She’d shown up just long enough to drink up a couple pods of life fibers, and no amount of shrill taunting could convince her to stay. It was oddly difficult to fall asleep without the force of exhaustion hurrying the process along. She paced up and down the main hall, trying to find something to distract herself.

When Nonon first gave up on sleep and meandered out into the hall, she did so in the gloom of moonlight filtering through the windows. But that wouldn’t do, and within minutes all the lights, even the chandeliers, had been switched on. Then came the dining hall lights, then the foyer, the game room, great room, guest bedrooms, conservatory, library, even the patio. Every shadowy doorway she came across meant a new light-switch to turn on, and with nothing better to do she went around and started turning on lights in rooms that weren’t even in her way. She even found a couple burnt-out bulbs and again, with nothing better to do, she tried to change them. But she couldn’t find the extra lightbulbs.

Eventually there were no dark rooms left in the entire penthouse, so she flopped down on the nearest couch. She thought it was an interesting place to be because it wound up being in the conservatory, where she almost never went. But then she started feeling a little hungry, so she had to go to the kitchen and get a snack. She’d thrown out everything unhealthy in the house when she started Kamui training, so yogurt would have to do (not that she didn’t like

yogurt, but at the moment she'd really felt like some cookies would hit the spot). But then she was cold, so she had to go back to her room and get a sweat-jacket. There weren't any there, though, because since she spent five or more nights a week at the lab, she'd moved most of her clothing there besides fancy stuff. So she just grabbed a blanket. Now Nonon was finally ready to... scroll idly on her phone, as it turned out.

She knew exactly why the penthouse produced such agitated, unpredictable actions from her. It was the first place she'd ever lived in entirely alone, as an adult. For most, that would be a college dorm or a small apartment, but the effect was the same if not even more amplified by all the luxury. She had to make the most of it, nobody else would. That was really the only reason why she even bothered with infrequent visits to her penthouse or the family mansion, it would have been much more practical to just stay at the lab all the time. Well that and if she didn't get to sleep on her silk sheets every so often, she'd probably go crazy. Before she'd started her Kamui training Nonon had also felt this same compulsion, even worse then because she'd had more free time. She'd wasted hours dragging her audio editing computers to a new room and setting it all up before she settled down for the evening to write some music. It had been a while since she'd had time for that, but her fans would forgive her, right? Probably, and they'd better, really, they had nothing to complain about because it was all free.

"Ooh, text message," She hummed (Nonon talked to herself almost any time she was alone). All semblance of relaxation vanished, however, when she saw who it was from.

You know I just realized I never had a housewarming party for my new place The message from Uzu read, and Nonon wanted to scream. What the fuck was she supposed to do with that? On the one hand he really might want a nice innocent chat – no, who was she kidding of course he didn't. Somehow this led to "*D'ya want to come over?*". And the worst part was she'd have to say yes. She hated to give him that, but she'd been waiting for this message for weeks now.

So? You could have people over literally whenever She could have been much snarkier, but she held back. *I was under orders not to contact anyone but secure numbers... but if I'd known it was you...* Those words had come back to her at least twice a day since Uzu and her had talked in Saiban's chamber. He would have violated Satsuki's own security procedures – unthinkable for her former elites – just to let her know he was okay. That was nice, really in retrospect the whole thing was really quite nice.

But she'd had another realization too, besides that he was still into her despite being terrible at showing it. That realization was that if she wanted a boyfriend anytime soon, she was stuck with him. Nobody who hadn't been at Honoujji would do. Even if some ideal man, a carbon copy of Uzu or even better, and also a respectable adult, started hitting on her at a bar or somewhere it just couldn't work long term. How could she be expected to live with someone who couldn't see Saiban, who would never understand that whole part of her life? At this point, there was no way she would give all that up for anyone. He had her over a barrel. *Maybe I'm lucky, and he feels the same way. Oh who am I kidding, I guess at this point so long as I'm not just another piece of ass to him I'll take it.*

Well sure, but I don't want to just trash the placelike some people we both know**

ugh, don't even mention that bitch. I'm trying to have a relaxing evening at home

anyway, what I was gonna do was ask Satsuki or someone to help me host

Or someone?

What?

I know that means me, don't tiptoe

Fine, yeah

and you know what, I'd appreciate if you dropped all the pretense

What pretense, I'm serious!If I'm gonna have people over here I want to do it right**

I seriously doubt you'd go through the trouble

You try me

I bet you're just saying this because you think it's what I want to hear

Oh really?And why would I do that?**

Because you're working up to asking me over, aren't you?

...

Do you want to come over?

...

Yeah, okay

Aaaaah Uzu just texted me and asked me to come over and I said YES!Aaaaa
whatisgoingon** Houka chuckled as he read the message from Nonon, pushing his laptop
away and sitting up.

Oh shit

Yeah I know!

Did you just get booty called?

OMG shut up you bitchYou had something to do with this, didn't you**

Whaaaaaaat?

Oh you put him up to thisYou're so dead**

heheShit that makes me sound really guilty**

wonder why

honest truth? **I just mentioned you while we were playing gamesAnything that happened after that was entirely his idea**

Right

But you're really going

I'm so fucking dumbwhy am I like this about boys**well, him particularly**

hasn't even taken you to dinner smdh

Oh shit you're right!

pardon?

Imma make him take me on a real date instead! See how he likes that!

Wowsock it to 'em sis**

Alright, well you just keep your creepy, longass fingers out of other people's business from now on, got it

my fingers aren't THAT long

thanks for the good idea though

Will report back in later

Roger thathave fun tho seriously**

When Nonon stopped responding, Houka laid back down and started typing out a message to Shiro:

Operation Matchmaker is a success

I'm right down the hall you know

And I'm very comfy

You're the worstMaybe now you get to work on finding a bride for our fearless leader**

hey, the point was to get rid of the distraction to Nonon for the sake of her trainingYou really think Satsuki needs that**

Please, you're having way too much fun with this to use that excuseI think you're just intimidated by the challenge of finding someone worthy of her**

NahWell maybe a little**but Ryuko said she'd take her out clubbing one day**wouldn't want to step on her toes**

Fine fineHey you busy I've got something to show you?**New gadget I synthesized from the hardened life fibers**

bring it here I'm trying to sleep

That's singlehandedly the dumbest thing you've ever said

Alright, change of plans Nonon typed out – slowly, because she was trying to do her hair at the same time.

Wait, what? Came Uzu's response.

If we're going on a date then we're actually going on a date

We're going on date?

Is there something wrong with that

No!Jesus of course not**

GoodI already called my chauffeur so we'll go someplace near yours, ok?**

Where?

anywhere, you pick What a moron. That was the man's job. Even if he didn't know where to go, he should know that it was time to start looking.

Alright, I'll find someplace you'll like

I would hope so

“Uzu, hello! Nice to hear from you. Although I wasn't expecting a call at this hour.” Even through the phone Uzu's hypersensitive ears could pick up a pot boiling on the stove. A bit of a late dinner, but then Satsuki had probably just gotten home from work. And who was he to talk he was going out for dinner (well, second dinner) at 9pm too.

“Hey Satsuki, sorry I can't chat long. I got a quick question for ya.”

“Oh, certainly, ask away.”

“Uh, so, where is Nonon's favorite place to eat in downtown Tokyo?”

There was a moment of near silence on the other side of the line. Near silence, because Uzu could hear her hum-chuckling softly to herself.

“Well, if I’m being honest, most of the time she gets distracted by street food, or cheap pizza -,”

“-But that’s not -,”

“-But that’s not what you want, I know,” Satsuki said at almost the same time. “Hmm. I’m sending you the address to a place we went to for one of our monthly lunches. She keeps saying we need to go back there. It’s Thai and Malay food, and pretty pricey. But your wallet can take it. If you can’t get a reservation just mention me or Ryuko, in fact your own clout might be enough by now, feel free to try it out.”

“Yeah, that’s perfect. Thankyou!”

“You’re welcome,” Satsuki said, and before Uzu got out his goodbye, she added “Oh, and Uzu?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m happy for you. I’d tell you to treat her well, but I don’t think you need to be told.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about there. Alright, talk to you soon, goodbye.”

The ride over, after picking Uzu up, was mercifully short. I must have been the nerves, but they just couldn’t keep conversation up. Uzu almost even told Nonon how nice she looked a second time, as if it hadn’t been the first thing he said when he got in the car, but caught himself just in time. *Oh man, we aren’t on the same page at all*, they both thought at different times, *please, this had better not have been a huge mistake*.

That all changed when Nonon saw where they’d arrived, and her face lit up with joy.

“Oh my god how did you know!” She whispered excitedly as they were led to a table with a window view out onto the skyline, surrounded by the jealous glares of a long line waiting for seat assignments, “And how on Earth did you get a reservation on such short notice?”

“You think I’m gonna give away all my secrets so easily?”

“Well, it could be useful to know,” She said teasingly.

“Call it a little diplomatic skill I picked up on my travels,” He said mysteriously, examining the menu, “now, is this place gonna live up to the hype?”

“Are you gonna bitch about spiciness?”

“I would never!”

“Heh, I’ll take that challenge. But you’ll love it.”

“Sounds good to me,” Uzu said, smiling. After the waiter had taken their drink orders, he asked, “So, er, what’ve you been up to lately?”

“Really? I think you know.”

“Just that? I mean I dunno it’s been a couple weeks you could have hung out with friends or something.”

“Could’ve, but I didn’t,” Nonon said, and Uzu nodded appreciatively as if to say he approved of taking it seriously. *See, any other guy would be asking me where I was going off to all the time, wanting me to spend more time with them when I really just can’t. I can tell him, and more importantly, he gets it. It’s what he’d be doing if he were in my place.* “Nah, it’s been pretty dull but that’s how it’s gotta be. What about you?”

“My new dojo’s finally ready to go, we had our first classes, what, two weeks ago or so.”

“Oh yeah, I haven’t been down to check it out yet.”

“That’s alright, I didn’t expect you to. Honestly, I don’t even have time for guests, it’s a madhouse. And I only teach the advanced classes!”

“Well, yeah, obviously, did you think people wouldn’t line up around the block for you just for the fame?”

“I mean, yeah, I suppose. Um, you don’t mean like I’m ripping them off or something, right?”

“What? No that’s not what I meant. You’re just cashing in on all the shit we’ve done now, it’s only fair. I did it with my music, Houka and Shiro got their Nobel, Satsuki with her – well, her everything. It’s only fair you take your turn.”

“At this point the only one’s who haven’t are Ira and Ryuko.

“But he will, and she doesn’t want it or something.”

“Well, does she, or doesn’t she? I dunno,” Uzu said with an intriguing lilt in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Here, you’ll appreciate this – her girlfriend, so I’ve heard, was like her biggest fan even before they met. Celebrity crush, y’know?”

“No way,” Nonon said with a giggle. Uzu had quickly sensed that ragging on Ryuko was one of Nonon’s favorite forms of gossip, and so long as it was good natured, he didn’t mind. This one sounded a lot worse in retelling than it was in reality, so maybe that made it better.

“I mean its just what I heard.”

“No shame on that girl I swear! That’s classic her. Takes whatever she wants. But you don’t feel like you’re ripping anyone off, right?”

“Nah, nah. I do kinda wish I could teach the normal classes too, but there’s just no time. But they’re all taught by guys I’ve coached, so really it’s okay, they’re very good. Oh, but you know what my favorite part of the dojo is? It’s when Satsuki comes in some mornings for her private practice.”

“You beat her yet?”

“No!” He exclaimed with evident frustration, “Holy shit what’s up with her?”

“I know! I fought her a couple weeks ago and I couldn’t get through her defense once! That backhand ri-,”

“-backhand riposte!” Uzu exclaimed at the same time, “Yeah what the hell. Like the whole tengantsu-shingantsu this is like – if I can see something coming, I should be able to avoid it right? But I just never see it coming!”

“Well I’m amazed at how you even hold your own against her! I mean, I think my defense could use work compared to yours, I’ll admit that. But like how do you do it?”. For the next half hour or so their conversation exclusively revolved around swordplay. Both of them were relieved to find that, with the help of a few glasses of wine (they didn’t get carded – friends of Satsuki Kiryuin never got carded), it went more than smoothly. It was like they were picking up right where they left off, the year of separation since the end of the war completely forgotten. Just like those evenings they’d spent staring out into the sea, ruins of Osaka at their backs, drinking in the sunset and each other’s presence because at any moment a COVER might show up on the horizon and then they’d be fucked.

“Here, here’s the one you want,” Nonon pointed to an item on Uzu’s menu with a smile while the waiter was taking their entrée orders, making sure to ghost over his hand, “It’s my favorite, for sure.”

“Ooh, three fire icons, spicy.”

“Exactly. So, here’s the challenge. You finish the whole thing, and you’ll have gotten further through it than me.”

“You’re on! And, uh, what do I win if – when – I finish it?”

“Besides pride? I’ll think of something,” She smiled coyly. The entrées themselves took a shockingly short time to come out – they must have been preparing plates of the more popular dishes on an assembly line – and for a while neither of them talked as they enjoyed their food. But Uzu couldn’t help but notice that Nonon was staring wistfully at his food. Oh yeah, she’d said it was her favorite, didn’t she?”

“Oh, fine, fine, I’ll take the L. You go over, I’ll go under, alright,” Nonon beamed as they swapped plates. That was victory enough.

“God, we’re so fucked up, aren’t we?” Nonon said suddenly when they were about halfway done.

“Hmm? what do you mean?” Uzu said when he finished his mouthful.

“I was just thinking, we’ve known each other for like, what, four years?”

“Four going on five, yeah.”

“Fourish years, and still besides your preferred opening stances and how you do your left-flank feint I know nothing about you. Like, what’s your favorite movie, did you have pets when you were growing up, where’s your dream vacation, nothing. Like what did we even talk about back in Osaka?”

“We didn’t talk very much,” He said with a chuckle, and she giggled too.

“True, I guess. But like, I don’t even know what kind of music you like, and that’s *kind of* my business. Just how you fight.”

“Oh yeah, totally,” *Oh wow, she actually wants to know about me!* “I mean, if we’re being honest, I had to ask Satsuki to find out about this place so like I’m right there with you.”

“So *that’s* how you did it.”

“She says hi by the way.”

“Cute. I used to think you never asked just because you didn’t care, but I see now that’s just the sort of violent assholes we are, huh.”

“I mean, I guess so. So, do you want to go first? Or should I?”

“Huh?”

“Well, there’s one way to fix that, isn’t there? Well, c’mon, I’m all ears.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“Nonon, you know I think you’re great and all, but let’s face it, you love talking about yourself.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Well lucky for you, I’m a pretty good listener.”

“That’s gotta be the corniest shit I’ve ever heard,” Nonon groaned, but she started anyway. *And honest-to-god first date’s gotta be a little corny, I guess. Mother would be so proud. Ha! She would be til she found out it was with a nameless orphan gang leader!*

A few hours, a second bottle of wine, and a few orders of roti later, Nonon’s chauffer was pulling up in front of Uzu’s building once again. In the seclusion of the back seat, he’d seen

fit to throw a casual arm over Nonon's shoulder, and when he stood to go, she pressed back into the seat

"So, uh, what're we doing now?" He asked, face flushed both from the wine and her proximity. Whatever perfume she had on smelled good, sort of vanilla-ish, and this close it was overpowering. How well this gamble had turned out! What had he been so worried about, again? Oh, right, all that nasty stuff Nonon had said last time he asked her out. But that was months ago, and if she apparently didn't care about it anymore, he didn't care.

"Hmm, before that, we've got to talk about what we're doing in general, okay?" She said, demanding as ever. She looked so cute, though, that he couldn't help but lean in and give her a quick peck on the lips. She didn't seem to mind though, leaning in almost imperceptibly and letting out a quiet "oh".

"Does that answer your question?"

"Shut up!" She said, suddenly a little flustered, "Uh, look here, you can't just charm your way out of this!"

"Can't I?"

"I'm being serious."

"Yeah, I – uh, sorry."

"Look, do get why I turned you down back when you first asked me out?"

"Sure, you wanted commitment, and I thought I had that, and you disagreed."

"Well, really I just wanted you to stop doing things that pissed me off."

"Oof, tall order."

"Maybe. Maybe I was being unreasonable. But you do really piss me off sometimes."

"Sure, but it's all in good fun, right?"

"No, not the teasing. The other stuff. Responsibility and shit and yeah commitment too, y'know, acting like an adult."

"Hey, if you're going at someone for immaturity it should be Houka or someone! Sheesh, what the hell do you expect; I have a business now, you know, sounds pretty adult to me!"

"Will you let me finish!" Nonon returned shrilly, then took a breath to calm herself, "I was gonna say that I realized that maybe I was expecting more from you than what I really wanted. I don't need you all cleaned up, although if we're together now I am gonna work on that, fair warning. I think I asked for that from you as, like, a sign that you cared about me."

"Oh, Nonon," He said wistfully, "shit, I wish you'd told me, I'd have done it! I thought you were just saying you weren't into me for those reasons. But did you really think I didn't want

you then? Because I tried to make myself very clear.”

“Uzu, how many of your female club presidents did you flirt with at Honoujji? How many did you end up actually hooking up with?”

“Uh, a few.”

“Right, and how many since then?”

“Not as many. None – well, almost none – when I was in Europe.”

“So do you see why that kind of talk might seem a little hollow coming from you?”

“Yeah,” He said with a sigh, “I – I can get that. I’m really sorry, that – that all was a mistake.”

“It’s in the past, I think we both got carried away. And besides, looks like you have cleaned up your act, anyway. What are you laughing about?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Uzu smirked, he hadn’t really been *laughing*, but he had thought of something sort of funny, “It’s just, under it all you’re a very traditional girl sometimes, aren’t you?”

“A traditional girl who could kick your ass, but sure, keep it up.”

“No, no, it’s cute, own it! I think it’s just kind of funny how I’ve never realized that ‘til now.”

“Nothing traditional about maybe wanting us to be exclusive. Is that doable, you think?”

In response, Uzu kissed her again, longer this time. Such soft lips, such tiny, dainty hands on his cheeks. And those eyes, those miraculous, shimmering pink eyes that told him plain as day, *I’ve missed this just as much as you*. Nonon always thought her unique eyes and her hair were ugly – why, Uzu would never understand. He wanted to punch whoever’d put that stupid idea in her head. “I’ll do whatever it takes so long as I can do that again. Besides, if I can have you what would I need another girl for?”

“Jesus, you are corniest human known to science.”

“You love it, c’mon.”

“Yeah, I can work with that. So, are we agreed?”

“Of course we are! What, am I gonna say no now?” Nonon’s arms were around his torso in a flash, head pressed on his neck up to his chin. Only the knowledge that the chauffeur was still there and probably waiting to go home and relax stopped him from staying there all night long.

“Then it’s official: we’re giving this whole dating thing a shot.”

“If Houka and Shiro can manage it then so can we, eh?”

“Heh, I won’t tell them you said that.”

“I appreciate that,” He said with a smug smile, as though it needed to be said. “So, what then are we doing now? You wanna continue this conversation somewhere more private?”

“Heh. Totally honestly though, you played yourself with that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’m way too stuffed for anything fun right now.”

“All the rotis, huh?”

“Why-oh-why did we order three whole plates?”

“Well, don’t worry about it. But, er, if you weren’t too full, you’d be down?”

“I – I could be persuaded,” She murmured into his chest.

“I can work with that. And honestly that’s good because if I don’t lay down right now I think I might burst.”

“Hmm. Wait, so despite that if I said I wanted to fuck you’d’ve done it anyway?” Nonon said as they disentangled themselves.

“Well yeah.”

“You get points for enthusiasm, I’ll give you that.”

“Well, do you wanna come up anyway? Literally have coffee?”

“Definitely.”

Sleep found them leaned on each other on the couch in front of a blaring TV. The next morning Houka had to call Nonon, Uzu, and Uzu’s neighbor just to find someone who would answer and tell him she was calling in sick that day. Ryuko seemed very disappointed, although she pretended she wasn’t.

Chapter End Notes

In the OVA they mention Uzu having parents but I’m cancelling that because it doesn’t make much sense that Satsuki found him living lost boys style in the woods if he weren’t an orphan. Plus it’s more dramatic

Part 1 of: In which Satsuki steps out of her comfort zone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September 2065

I can hardly believe this is really happening, Satsuki thought as she examined her outfit in the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the Kiryuin Penthouse's master bedroom. In her years of manipulating human behavior, she had learned that many people would say over and over that they were going to do something but never get around to it unless forced. How had she thought that Ryuko could be one of those people – that she wouldn't make good on her promise to take Satsuki out to Tokyo's nightclub scene with the express purpose of finding her a date? It wouldn't work, though. Satsuki had known that since the moment she suggested it months ago in that sushi shop. *I hope she isn't disappointed, but no matter how this goes – good time, bad time, somewhere in between – I can't possibly see how I leave this night in a relationship of any kind. Especially not a one-night stand, heaven forbid.*

"Lookin' good there, *Mei*," Ryuko smiled as she strolled out from the bathroom, where she'd been helping Haruka get ready, "Whaddya think?"

It took Satsuki a moment to respond, unused to the fake name as she was (which made it good practice, if annoying, that Ryuko insisted on using it constantly). "Hmm. Well, it depends on if you think I look like Mei Sugimoto, your friend from high school, or Satsuki Kiryuin, as seen on TV."

"Well Mei, I still see Satsuki, y'know, so I don't think I'll be a good judge. Yo, Haruka!"

"Yeah?" Haruka leaned her head out, damp hair still spilling everywhere.

"Mei – is the disguise complete? Help me out here I can't tell."

"Oh, you look beautiful La – er – Satsuk – er – Mei," She said, and Satsuki felt the urge to scoff at her stumbling. She couldn't look a "noble-lady" in the eyes even when she was dressed down to fit in with clubgoers. How had Ryuko and her even hit it off to begin with, how was she even brave enough to talk to Ryuko? "I don't think you'd look like you to someone passing on the street. But what do I know?" *Surely you must know something though, right?*

"Hmm, I suppose that will do," Satsuki replied, and in truth she did find the outfit convincing. With open toed sandals, a bunch of Mako's spangliest bracelets, a big gold necklace, and a careful dash of dark, glossy makeups she would never usually touch (most days she avoided makeup entirely) she didn't look like the Satsuki Kiryuin people would be familiar with from the news, although looking at herself she still saw Satsuki, not a new

person. But what really completed it was the dress: classy but not fancy, it used a minimal color scheme – just grey with red highlights - and fit her just about perfectly. The short, lacy hems and open shoulders were comfortable and let her skin breathe, perfect for the humid late-summer night. And with such a deep cleavage complete with little ruffles and red accents in just the right places she knew she would draw a lot of attention – mostly from men, sure, but still. “I really must thank you though Ryuko, it’s really come together. It’s not exactly your style, nor is it mine, but it suits me, I think. This dress, particularly - what designer is this? I’ve never seen one quite like it.”

“Hehe, you’re welcome,” Ryuko said, reaching up behind her head nonchalantly. “Oh, you wanted to try putting your hair up, didn’t you? Uhh... crap my hair ties are in my bag downstairs. Haruka can you run get it?” She said, in a tone that immediately implied she didn’t expect any protest. “On the table in the den.”

“Sure!” Haruka said enthusiastically and scurried off with her hair still hanging in damp cords and her shirt half-buttoned.

“She’s getting it?” Satsuki asked skeptically. She hadn’t expected Ryuko to order her around like that – in her brief experience with them as a couple Ryuko asked almost nothing of Haruka, preferring to avoid relying on others as much as possible, as always. But then Ryuko was acting oddly energetic, even for her.

“Ah, she doesn’t mind. So, you like the dress?”

“Oh yes, very much so. It’s a new look for me but I think it’s quite nice.”

“Heh, good, good,” Ryuko said with an awkward chuckle, “You were asking about the designer though? There’s – uh – there’s a funny thing about that.”

“Oh?”

“Well, ah, the designer... it’s me. I made that.”

“Wait, you? Ryuko I... when did you learn how to do this?” Satsuki said with a shocked, breathless little laugh.

“Intro to Fashion Design; it’s one of my new classes this semester. I’m taking it with Haruka – just kind of an art elective, she thought it sounded fun. Apparently, I’m pretty good at it.”

“But the semester just started a couple weeks ago!”

“Yeah, so?” She snapped, then corrected, “Well, I mean, we move pretty fast.”

“That may be so but this is far beyond an introductory level,” Satsuki said, admiring the stitching. If she didn’t know better, she’d easily mistake it for the handiwork of a master seamstress. And yet as far as she knew before this class Ryuko hadn’t touched a sewing machine once in her life, let alone made clothing by hand. Maybe she’d repaired her own

clothing when she was on her own, but judging by the shape of the what she was wearing when she arrived in Honnouji, probably not.

“Nah, nah. Well, when they saw I was doing well they said I could make something bigger for my first project,” It was almost as if she couldn’t decide whether to be utterly humble or brazenly proud. With Ryuko there wasn’t really a middle ground.

“I see. And the design itself?”

“Mine too.”

“I should have expected as much – it’s quite unique.”

“It just sort of came to me, it’s nothing really,” she said with a casual shrug, but the look on her face was less than casual. It was the same sort of lost-puppy expression that Ryuko’d worn a few times before, that brought up an urge in Satsuki to throw her arms around her and reassure her that everything was alright. As if the dress had drawn itself from her of its own accord, and she didn’t know whether to love or fear her new creation.

Satsuki understood the turmoil that crossed Ryuko’s face, because something similar was playing in her chest. Nobody could be such a prodigy – gaining both technical proficiency and artistic eye in just a few weeks. It wasn’t natural, and although by all accounts she was very impressed with the end product, it scared Satsuki. Ragyo, their mother, *she’d* been an amazing designer too – only Harime was better. Was it in her blood? Were the fibers telling her how to shape the cloth somehow? That look on her face told Satsuki that Ryuko was just as aware of how eerie it was and no closer to any answers. She didn’t know what to say, so finally she came right out and said it.

“So, is this something you might be interested in studying? Making a career out of?”

“Uh, I guess? I don’t know, it feels wrong to have a talent at this and like, not use it. But...”

“...It’s a bit ironic, isn’t it, all things considered?”

“You can say that again.”

“Tell me though, do you enjoy it? Because if not, then there’s no point even if you are gifted.”

“Honestly?” Ryuko said quietly, as though she didn’t want herself to hear it, “I love it. I really, really love it. I don’t even know why. Maybe it’s just nice to be good at something for once.”

“Oh Ryuko,” Satsuki sighed sympathetically, but Haruka’s footsteps echoed up the stairs, and suddenly the spell was broken. Ryuko beamed as her girlfriend returned with her handbag and gave her an appreciative kiss. *She concealed her true mood quite quickly. Like a real Kiryuin, I suppose*, Satsuki thought appreciatively, but then, *Oh no, that’s real. Stop,*

you aren't supposed to make her smile like that! Try as she might, Satsuki couldn't accept that this woman was the one to brighten Ryuko's mood. Especially not when she seemed much better at bringing out her anxieties instead.

No, this evening's mission would end in failure. How could she be satisfied with anything less than being the one whose presence alone made Ryuko smile?

Chapter End Notes

once again trying short chapters, because idk when i'll be able to finish this little plot arc with Christmas and I don't want to make people wait too long to read stuff I already finished. I figure I'm the only one whose OCD is triggered by different chapter lengths and posting styles.

Part 2 of: In which Satsuki steps out of her comfort zone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Okay, we’ll start out at *Typhoon Mary’s*, see if we can’t get Mei here a date, then after a while we go down to *S-Tier Rebuilt*, meet Uzu and Nonon, they put on some of her songs, we play it by ear from there, got it?” Ryuko said to everyone in the limo, making sure they all knew the plan.

“Actually, it seems Uzu and Nonon won’t be in attendance tonight,” Houka said without looking up from his phone, “She’s just texted me that they’re staying at the place overnight, practicing. So we don’t have to leave *Mary’s* until you’re all good and ready.”

“For the best, really, she should be maximizing her time spent training anyway,” Shiro said with an appreciative nod.

“Aw damnit,” Ryuko sighed, “Wait, you *know* they’re gonna have sex down there, right?”

“Oh gosh, do you really think?” Mako gasped with a scandalized giggle. Even though she didn’t drink, even though Ira wasn’t free on account of work, she was still there tagging along for the fun of it.

“Frankly, I’d be disappointed if they didn’t. I just hope they duel a little too,” Houka responded, also laughing a little.

“Gross. Still, it’s good that we can stay at *Mary’s* as long as we like,” Ryuko declared. She was genuinely disappointed though, Uzu was always a good time, and she found herself oddly looking forward to seeing what Nonon was like trashed on fruity cocktails. Maybe even see what she could get her to do once she was blacked out. Something scandalous on video would be excellent to hold over her head when she sobered up.

And hey, you couldn’t spend months practicing martial arts and swordplay with a bare-naked woman and not wonder how those amazingly toned legs might feel in other contexts. She’d known much more adamantly straight women who became bicurious with a little alcohol in them. Haruka wouldn’t mind obviously, and Uzu probably wouldn’t either. Apparently, this was the sort of mood she was in that night, ready to get out there and drink some booze, break some rules, test the limits of some friendships, probably break some furniture too. She had already taken a couple shots of vodka from the limo’s mini bar; it hadn’t hit yet but the wait wouldn’t be long. Messing with Nonon would have to wait though, but she’d find another outlet, she always did.

“I’m sorry, but why is *Typhoon Mary’s* preferable to the other club you mentioned? I’m not familiar with these venues.”

“*Mary’s* is a club for women like us,” Satsuki nodded; that made it plenty clear. “Haruka and I go there all the time. Won’t get much unwanted attention from guys there. Also, it’s not too

upscale, people are mostly pretty down-to-Earth. You'll like it, trust me."

"I see. But Houka, Shiro, you'll be alright? This isn't a place where they'd be uncomfortable, is it?" She addressed the first question to Houka and Shiro, the second to Ryuko.

"Please, you don't have to worry about us," Shiro assured her.

"Although we appreciate your concern," Houka added.

"We're just here to chill out, doesn't matter where," Shiro nodded.

"Mhm! And last time I was in the city we all went to *Mary's* and we had a great time! Although you were both still *on your phones* too much!" Mako exclaimed exuberantly.

"See, nothing ta worry about. But I still think you should see *S-Tier* too, since you're kinda the reason it even exists."

"Oh? How's that?"

"It used to be in a real shady part of town, right? It had close down because of all the gangsters and stuff. But now that the city's gettin' fixed up they can reopen. That's why it's got the *Rebuilt* in the name. It's also supposed to be like the best in the city, but you can judge that for yourself, eh?"

"Yes I'd like to. Well, it sounds like you've got everything planned quite well, I supposed I'll follow your lead."

"You've got nothing ta worry about Mei, we've got this down to a science."

Typhoon Mary's turned out to be exactly what Satsuki had expected. Blinding lights, deafening electronic music (although not quite as deafening as the "whoo!" Ryuko had let out as she barreled through the door), and the overpowering scents of weed and alcohol filled the dance floor and bar and spilled out through open floor-to-ceiling windows onto the street. Satsuki nearly staggered when they first entered. And the patrons. Cut-off tank tops that covered less skin than the bras underneath, glitzy dresses that left not a single curve to the imagination, the shortest of short-shorts. And what was underneath them, well, Satsuki instantly felt a wave of discomfort as she fought conflicting urges to stare and to respectfully tear her eyes away. She couldn't discern what the right thing to do was. *Dammit how can this disarm me? I've spent years holding my own in Ragyo's ruthless court and here I am at a loss in a happy little nightclub?*

It wasn't that every one of the throng of young women who packed the club to standing room only was so gorgeous, or even so scantily clad, but still. When had she every had so much raw female sexuality so brazenly shoved in her face? Were their eyes on her too? Usually that wouldn't have been a problem, but today, in her disguise, she was just waiting for the moment someone recognized her for who she really was. It wasn't so long before something

else was shoved in her face: An icy, almost opaque lemony-yellow cocktail that was held in Ryuko's offering hands. Well, one of her hands, the other being firmly wrapped around Haruka's middrift.

"I took the liberty," She yelled over the din. When Satsuki stared at her, confused that someone was trying to talk to her in this environment, she grinned and yelled, "Look, I know you don't really want so much alc, but you'll like it. It'll look more natural if you go around holding a drink anyway, even if you don't finish it."

"No, that's alright, thank you," Satsuki said, quickly grabbing the glass. She gave it an experimental sip. It was sweet and extremely lemony, but not enough to overpower the liquor, which must have been quite strong. *Ryuko must love these*, Satsuki thought, and decided that it wasn't at all bad. She kept sipping.

"Cool, cool," By this point Houka, Shiro and Mako had secured a table not far from the bar, where they'd run into some people they'd recognized: a few lesbian women who seemed to know Ryuko from college and two couples, one gay and one straight, who were there to hang out with them. Everyone said friendly hellos, as much as that was possible with all the noise, and Satsuki got a chance to practice with her alias. The couples including Shiro and Houka and Mako (who wanted to make it clear she was spoken for) all took their seats, but when Satsuki went to take a chair Ryuko stopped her, saying, "Hold on Mei, don't you want to mingle a little bit first?"

"Oh I um... I guess?"

"Here, tell ya what, I've got some friends I wanna say hi to before I maybe introduce 'em to ya, so why don't you go stand over by the bar for a couple minutes and I'll check up in a few?"

"Sure? Well, I just, on my own?"

"I mean, you're sure to attract attention. I just thought since this is your first time, maybe it'd be easier being hit on than the other way around. But you can do what you want, trust me Mei someone interesting will come your way."

"No, I'll try the bar," It would be nice to have something structured, almost like a job to do. A sentry posting.

"Alright, well if it sounds good to you. You got your story straight?" Satsuki nodded in response.

"Great. People know who I am here, the regulars don't give a shit that I'm famous, so you can mention me if it comes up. In fact, I bet someone's probably already noticed us over here talking. Oh, and Mei?" she added, so quiet that for a moment Satsuki doubted she'd heard it.

"Hmm?"

"Quit looking so worried, alright?" She smiled, "There's no pressure to match with someone your first time, just think of it as practice. It's supposed to be fun, y'know? Going out,

meeting new, cute people. Just relax, okay? I know you're the last one who needs more stress.”

“Yes, I’ll try” Satsuki cursed herself for the weak, uncertain response. Ryuko was right, of course, everybody was here to have a good time and if someone started flirting with her, they wouldn’t be too upset by a rejection. But still, it was so new, and Satsuki knew Ryuko would be disappointed with herself if she didn’t deliver. Even though Satsuki had never said she wanted a date, much less a girlfriend. *She must feel so at home here, she’s probably had some great memories here. So of course she’s got some expectation that she can turn this into a wild sexual escapade for me, or maybe even a relationship.* She couldn’t tell if she wanted to feel so at home in a place like this, or just wanted to leave.

How was she already almost halfway done with her cocktail?

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I considered cutting this chapter entirely, but part of the fun of fanfiction to me is being with the characters even in some of the less important moments because we want to write about how they might react and feel. In this case I tried to channel some of my own social anxiety into Satsuki. LMK though if you think little bits like this aren't necessary; I probably won't listen, but it's good to know.

Part 3 of: In which Satsuki steps out of her comfort zone

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“That any good?” Satsuki nearly jumped when a loud voice cut in unexpectedly from the right. A tall, voluptuous young woman with short black hair and a winding dragon tattoo on her arm was suddenly leaning on the bar next to her, smiling charmingly very, very close to Satsuki’s face. It took her a moment to realize that the newcomer was asking about her nearly empty cocktail.

“Oh, it is indeed. It’s very sweet though, not for everyone. I’m afraid I don’t know what it’s called, a friend gave it to me.”

“Well, I certainly don’t mind sweet,” The woman said, then, “Yo pops, I’ll take one of what she’s got!” The bartender, a gruff old biker-looking dude who all the regulars seemed to look up to like a father or older brother, nodded amiably, “Er, do you want a refill?”

“Alright,” Satsuki replied, aware that she was probably sending out the vibe that she was interested. But it had been a couple minutes of lingering at the bar and while she didn’t *think* she had a problem with running out the clock not talking to anybody Ryuko had reassured her she’d attract attention. She’d been terrified that she was scaring people off with an unintentionally severe expression.

“Make that two!” Her new companion followed up. “So, who’s this friend of yours?”

“Oh, well, um, It’s Ryuko Matoi, actually.”

“Oh woww, so you *do* know her! I had a suspicion. And that makes you...”

“Mei Sugimoto.”

“Oh darn, nobody famous,” Satsuki felt a moment of panic, wondering if that was a subtle way of saying that she knew *exactly* who she was. But as she ran through her mental checklist, she saw no signs that this woman was hiding anything. Well, except that she liked what she saw.

“No, I’m afraid not, sorry to disappoint,” The plan Ryuko had proposed was that Satsuki lie about her identity until she hit it off with a girl, then as soon as they were somewhere private reveal who she really was and see how they took it. No reason to lie any longer than necessary to keep word from spreading that she was there.

It would be so easy to get that far; this girl, with her cowgirl crop-top and ripped skinny jeans that outlined some very appealing curves, seemed confident and vivacious, at home in her sexuality. If Satsuki wanted, she had no doubt she could end the evening back at the penthouse with her, grabbing one of the guest bedrooms, shedding the crop-top, the jeans, Ryuko’s new dress. But then, what came next – what she almost certainly expected – No,

that wouldn't work. She just couldn't fathom how the next step would end in anything but disaster, and for a moment panic clawed at her chest. She'd have to find a way out of this conversation. Lost in thought Satsuki realized that she had completely missed the woman's name anyway.

"Mei, huh? That's cute, short and sweet. So Mei, how do you know "our lord and savior"?" She asked, then: "Er, you aren't one of those who think she's a goddess, right?"

"Oh goodness no. I went to high school with her, in Kanagawa. I'm just in town visiting, I go to school in Kansai."

"Oh yeah, makes sense. I met her right here, actually. Or rather, right over there," She pointed over to the other side of the bar with a little chuckle. "So you probably know Mako too, huh? I met her a couple times"

"Yes, I do. I've just been meeting some of the others tonight though."

"Man, if you thought she was wild before just wait until you put the two of 'em together. But I doubt I need to tell you that. I bet you've had more than enough of 'em – if I had to guess you're a library kinda gal, aren't you?"

"Quite the contrary, I find their antics charming, even if I can't always keep up. But I'd say you're right about me, though. How'd you know?"

"Oh, it's just something about you. You kinda look like this one English teacher I had back in middle school," She said in a conspiratorial, low voice, and Satsuki immediately jumped to the conclusion that that English teacher must've been her first crush or something. *I'm her exact type – or wait, is that exactly what she's trying to get me to think?* Her instincts at manipulating people told her this was an elaborate scheme to seduce her, but she couldn't believe it. They were just having a casual conversation, weren't they? Unbeknownst to even herself, in focusing more on trying to suss out what her new companion was up to she had completely handed the reigns of the conversation over to her and was on the edge of her seat, peering into her sparkling, vibrant grey eyes. "Plus, you've kinda got this weird, old-timey way of talking sometimes."

"Really?" Satsuki exclaimed, suddenly self-conscious. Talking like ordinary people was something she was still working on. "I – I'm sorry I guess I didn't notice!"

"Nohoho, it's okay, it's okay," She chuckled, with a reassuring hand wave that happened to graze Satsuki's arm. Her fingers were very warm. "I kinda like it, I dunno. Ah, here we go!" She said as their drinks arrived, and after sipping it, "Mmm, that is good. Looks like you have't steered me wrong Mei."

"Oh good, good that's a relief."

"So, what's life like over in Kanagawa, huh?"

"Honestly I haven't been there long, I'm actually from right here in Tokyo," This was part of the story Satsuki had worked out. Much easier to answer questions about

somewhere she had actually lived.

“Really? Me too!”

“We left a couple years back, when... you know... Honnouji.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m glad to hear someone made it out though. This city was a real shithole back then.”

“Mhmm, you can say that again,” Satsuki said. *My city, a shithole?* She thought, *No, I already knew that. Still it’s odd to hear it right from the mouth of someone who lived under my rule.*

“Yeah it was rough, we weren’t so lucky. One-stars got my dad within the first year for spreading anti-Kiryuin propaganda. I had to drop out to support Ma, but we got by.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” Satsuki gasped, and she meant it. She was flush with a peculiar mixture of guilt and relief. *Oh god, I ruined this woman’s life, didn’t I? This could never work out, I could never reveal my true identity to her.*

“It’s alright, It’s alright, really, that’s all in the past, right? And don’t worry I’m not jealous you got out, not like it’s your fault or anything. Just how it happened, eh?”

“Yes, sure, of course,” Satsuki blurted. Now she was looking in earnest for a way out of the conversation, but she somehow felt now like she’d gotten too deep into it. Everything she thought to say seemed either too rude or like it wouldn’t be enough to dissuade her.

“Now, you’ve really got to tell me what it’s like being friends with Ryuko, I’m really curious.” The conversation went on for a while longer, and though the initial pretense was gossiping about her celebrity friend each question found a way to be more about Mei, pushing the limits of the alias and forcing Satsuki to make things up on the fly. Having to think on her heels probably made her seem even more shy and self-conscious. But at least some of them, about things she liked, foods and movies and hobbies and such, were things Satsuki could answer honestly. And with each new detail came a subtle new compliment, sometimes so subtle even Satsuki didn’t recognize them for what they were at first. It was as if she was saying, *“I appreciate that you’re so smart, I wouldn’t be this subtle if I thought you wouldn’t notice”*.

And all the while Satsuki’s discomfort grew. She actually did find “dragon tattoo lady”, as she had childishly labelled her in her mind, quite likeable. But she was barking up the wrong tree, and Satsuki didn’t know how to tell her that.

“Yo, Mei, what’sss up!” A new voice suddenly cut in: Ryuko, thank god! She was noticeably drunker than when Satsuki last saw her, waving a handle of whisky around like a toy. But with the blush on her face and that wolfish, lopsided grin Satsuki suddenly forgot all about the woman she’d been talking to for the better part of twenty minutes. She just didn’t come anywhere close, how had Satsuki forgotten?

“Oh Ryuko, good to see you!” She greeted her warmly, and before she knew what was happening Ryuko’d thrown an arm across her shoulders.

“You’re the best, y’know that? I jusst wanted come over, let you know,” At this point she noticed Satsuki’s companion, and Satsuki thought she spotted a momentary, suspicious squint of her eyes. She seemed to become marginally soberer. “Hey, how’s it goin’?” She said, not unfriendly, but not friendly either.

“Hey Ryuko. I’m alright, you?”

“Fine, fine. Hey Mei, I gotta take a leak, you come with real quick?”

“Oh uh, sure,” Satsuki quickly said, all too happy to get out of there. But she did give her companion a look, sort of asking if it was alright. She shrugged.

“Yeah, go ahead. It was really nice to meet you Mei,” She said.

“Yeah, you too.”

“You think maybe I’ll see you later?” She said, with a leading tone that suggested that she was expecting a yes.

“Maybe,” Satsuki replied, more coyly than she meant.

In the mercifully empty bathroom Satsuki let out a massive sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank you for coming along when you did,” she said. Ryuko didn’t really seem to be listening

“I said, I’d come check up on you, didn’t I? Sorry I interrupted, but I think you’ll thank me,” Ryuko by all indication didn’t actually have to go to the bathroom, because all she did was check her face in the mirror and take a pull from her whiskey.

“Did you hear what she said, about living in Tokyo?”

“No, but listen, that gal? You didn’t want her anyway.”

“Why, what?”

“Serial womanizer’s what she is, been with just about every regular here. Expert pickup artist and you fell right into it. She’s nice and all, but all she wants you for is one night, trust me.”

“Well, she didn’t seem *that* bad to me,” Satsuki said tersely. something about Ryuko’s tone, the way she was coaching her like she was some naïve damsel, was annoying her. *Where were you fifteen minutes ago then, huh?*

“Woah, hey, Mei, chill out. I mean, if what you want’s a roll in the hay then go back out there, not tryna judge. I just thought that somethin’ more long term would be more you.”

“No, you’re right,” Satsuki sighed, “But that doesn’t matter; she told me something important.” Satsuki laid out for Ryuko everything she’d heard about “dragon tattoo lady”’s life during her reign.

“Shit,” Ryuko said, “That’s rough.”

“I can’t ask her or someone else like that to forgive me, can I?”

“Shit, no that wouldn’t fly. Aaalright so I guess that rules out anybody from Tokyo. Probably Osaka too.”

“Kind of hard to find people you haven’t wronged when you ruled the country with an iron fist,” Satsuki moped, hoping Ryuko would concede and they could give up this endeavor.

“There’s that negative thinking, Sats!” said, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “I’ll introduce you the next one, alright? I can wingman for ya, I’m not too shabby at it.”

“Sure, I think I’d appreciate that.”

“Don’t sweat it Mei, you’re doing great,” She switched back to the alias as she opened the door back into the pounding music of the dance floor, “Just fly casual and it’ll be fun. And hey, the night’s still young, who knows what’ll happen!”

Part 4 of: In which Satsuki steps out of her comfort zone

Chapter Summary

AKA In which Mako tries something new.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She'd expected Satsuki to be picky – frankly it would've been weird if she wasn't – but this was getting ridiculous. It must've been eight or nine girls that Ryuko had introduced her too by now and she'd yet to show any interest in them beyond the first couple minutes. Sure, she handled small talk just fine, but sooner or later her eyes would glaze over and by then her interest was lost no matter how Ryuko tried to turn the conversation around. None of them could disarm her like her first encounter at the bar had. Maybe it was a mistake to tear her away from that. Maybe she should just turn her loose to get hit on by whatever charmer thought they could handle her. But she'd kind of suspected that Satsuki would rather be the one on the attack.

It was frustrating, that was for sure. It sucked when a college acquaintance gave her a fiercely dirty look as Satsuki meandered off. She'd spent quite a lot of energy hyping her up, telling her that *Mei* was one of the coolest people she'd ever met, only to have her mutter into her drink and look like she'd rather be anywhere else. And as much as there were times when she felt a burst of joy when Satsuki rejected someone, thinking, *good, she wasn't worthy anyway*, the girl needed dating practice.

But on the other hand, she couldn't say it wasn't fun. There was a thrill to the manic activity, dashing around the club looking for more single young ladies she could fleece to be Satsuki's next reject. She'd ask people she knew from college or from some other party if they'd brought a friend who might be interested, and it was gratifying that relying just on that she could reach just about every patron. It was like she could see in her head the web of connections between everybody forming. *Look at all these friends I've made, and some of them didn't even know I was so famous when I met them!* Of course, the entire time she kept drinking, and as the haze of alcohol combined with her constant activity she couldn't think of what she'd do if Satsuki hit it off and her job was done.

What's funny is how she thinks dating is something totally different from the rest of life, Ryuko kept thinking to herself, *like she usually fearless but now it's totally different. I used to think that too, I told myself I'd figure it out later, and now look, I did figure it out! Well, kind of, kind of. She needs to know it's not such a big deal, it kills me to see her moping about it. Although she does look so cute when she's unconfident, makes me want to go over and give her a big hug and tell her everything's okay. It's just so funny though, so unlike her. It really is a foreign concept to her, totally different from the rest of life.* She had to keep

thinking about why this was necessary, to stop that feeling that this was a terrible idea and she shouldn't give Satsuki away like this.

And to not feel guilty about pulling Satsuki away from that first girl that she met at the bar. That was the closest she'd come to an actual connection. Not that what Ryuko'd said was *untrue*, she really wasn't a long-term relationship kind of girl. But that wasn't why she'd intervened, she'd seen that it looked like there was something there and then all of a sudden, her feet were taking her over to them. *Stupid drunk Ryuko that wasn't your place to say anything!* But if she hadn't, what would she have done? (Ryuko still hadn't fully processed that Satsuki had actually been dying to get out of that conversation)

She'd gone outside with Haruka to take a break and smoke, and as the cross-fade started to kick in she spotted Satsuki through the window, wandering around and looking lost. They made eye contact, Satsuki said something Ryuko had no chance of hearing, and on a whim Ryuko leaned over and blew her a little kiss, an exhalation of smoke coming with it and dissipating into the breezy night air. Satsuki's response, stammering awkwardly with a tremulous smile, left her struck with an overwhelming feeling of *something*. It was like lightheadedness, but good, invigorating, exactly what she'd needed.

What Ryuko didn't see was how Satsuki seemed to visibly flinch when Haruka threw her arms around Ryuko's waist and turned away when Ryuko responded in kind.

"There you are! Ah! Have you been smoking?" Mako suddenly shouted in Ryuko's ear, cutting through the blur. They were still out on the sidewalk – Haruka had gone inside a while ago, Ryuko wasn't sure how long- but Ryuko had stayed to finish her blunt and give a fellow who'd recognized her an autograph.

Ryuko'd never managed to finish the autograph (no pen), but he got something much better: the story of how he saw *the* Ryuko Matoi blitzed out of her mind in front of a lesbian bar in downtown Tokyo, which would go viral over the next couple weeks.

"Mako! Hey! You havin' fun?"

"Well yes, but don't change the subject! I thought you said you'd stop for me!" Mako whined. Her face glistened from the heat of the club as she crossed her arms and pouted.

"Mako, c'mon. That was back when we were dating. But it's no big deal anyway," She had to focus and squint, but Ryuko was pretty sure she wasn't slurring her words right now.

"It is so! It's a nasty habit."

"Sheesh, for a doctor's daughter you don't know very much about it, do you?"

"Yes, of course I do!"

"I bet you don't even know what it feels like," Ryuko taunted playfully. Mako seemed to think they were actually having an argument but Ryuko thought her determination to stay

straight-edge was oddly funny, if annoying at times like these. Either way, she wasn't having a serious discussion about it now.

"Yeah, I do!"

"Oh really? Well you can tell me about it then," Ryuko leaned on the wall.

"Well, uh, it makes you high."

"Mhmm?"

"And you get dizzy and it makes you think that doing really stupid things is a good idea. Hey, what're you laughing about?"

"Well, I think doing stupid things is a good idea all the time."

"Ryuukkooo! Stop making fun!" She pouted, but under it Ryuko could tell she was softening. As if she could ever stay mad, at anybody.

"Look Mako, you don't really know anything about it, but that's okay."

"I just think you're setting a bad example for Mataro and for your girlfriend."

"She's a grown woman Mako, and he's almost an adult too."

"I knowww... But still."

"It's really not a big deal, but if I can't prove it with words...", She reached into her jacket and pulled out the little purse-like bag she kept her weed in these days. "There's only one other way."

"Ryuko!" Mako gasped, scandalized.

"All it does is make you feel relaxed, I promise. You won't get addicted, you won't get sick, and then you'll know. Just this once?"

"...", Mako made a little growly noise in her throat for almost a full minute, "Just this once, okay?"

"You've got it."

"Okay then, for science."

"That's the spirit!"

"Alright!" Mako seemed oddly relieved. She leaned in close as Ryuko rolled a blunt for each of them (something she'd picked up from upperclassmen long before she actually tried smoking herself), and although she protested that she didn't need one all to herself Ryuko insisted that she needed enough to really feel it and she accepted that. When it came time to

actually light it though, she hesitated just a little, looking up at Ryuko with those huge doe eyes ablaze with the multicolored lights of the club.

“Don’t worry, I’m here to look after ya,” Ryuko said reassuringly, and Mako made a little “Mmm” noise and leaned in to the lighter, pressing her shoulder up to Ryuko. God, she was so soft. Haruka was always very warm, but a bit bony in some places. Satsuki, probably, was too muscular to be anything but firm. But Mako, you could just sink into her, and in the haze of the cross-fade clouding her mind and the thoughts of women and romance that had been occupying her all night that was all Ryuko could think about for a moment. And she only leaned in further when Ryuko tried to show her how to take a drag properly.

After a few minutes Mako took a step back, saying, “Whoo! Can we sit down?” and before Ryuko knew it they were leaned up against the brick wall near the window, stretching their legs across Ryuko’s rumpled army surplus jacket. Mako seemed a lot more comfortable now, arching her back a little and holding the blunt between index and middle fingers like she knew what she was doing.

“What?” She giggled when she saw Ryuko smiling at her.

“Oh, nothing. You look very sophisticated right now.”

“Sophisticated? Sitting on my phanny on the dirty sidewalk like a junkie?”

“Nah, you look like an old-timey lady with one a’ those long cigarette thingys. I’m tryna say it’s cute.”

“That’s sweet. You’re sweet.”

“When I want to be. But more importantly – how’re you feeling?”

“Oh, *weird*. I feel like I’m floating at sea, but I’m not dizzy.” She seemed pretty giddy too – she hadn’t stopped giggling to herself for several minutes – but she didn’t report that.

“So, good or bad?”

“Ooh, that lady had the prettiest dress, did you see that?”

“Mako? Focus?”

“Oh, right! It’s weird, I told you! But I don’t feel *bad*, so maybe that’s good.”

“That is good. But I knew you wouldn’t hate it.”

“Mmm,” She hummed, then paused for a while, “... Thank you for letting me try it, and not being too pushy. I hate when people are push and are like ‘you have to do drugs *now!*’. Makes me feel like their tricking me.”

“Of course.”

“... I wish we could spend more time together now,” Mako said a few minutes later in a confidential tone, “It sucks being off at college without my bestie!”

“Aw, Mako... but you know you can call me whenever you want,” Ryuko said, brushing a loose hair off Mako’s cheek. It wasn’t like they didn’t talk on the phone almost every day already.

“Noooo! That’s not good enough!” She moped, shuffling in a little closer until she was practically supported by Ryuko’s shoulder alone, heads pressed together.

“Mako...”

“I miss you,” She said sweetly.

“Yeah, I miss you too,” Ryuko responded with a chuckle and, without really thinking about it, reached around the arch of Mako’s back and back across her chest. She felt the weight of her breasts drape across her forearm. And the sudden increase of her heart rate.

“Ah! R-Ryuko what’re you doing?” Mako’s face suddenly went red and flustered.

“Oh, ah, I don’t know, sorry!” Ryuko stopped her hand before it crept under Mako’s shirt, waving her other arm around frantically. What was she thinking? She was used to Mako’s body being as good as hers – it felt so familiar, so right. Maybe on some other night she wouldn’t have done it, but for a moment there she just needed that physical contact. And now she was paying for it. She tried to pull her arm back around, but Mako curled up around it and looked up at her with a glint in her eyes.

“*Don’t do that* Ryuko! I didn’t mean I missed you like that! I have a boyfriend now, and you have a girlfriend. Who *isn’t me!*”

“Yeah, I know, I know. I didn’t mean it like that either. I’m just stupid,” Mako was making that little growly noise again, as if to say, “*I know you didn’t, but you still did it anyway. And I’m not saying I didn’t like it, but it’s still bad*”

“No, you’re not stupid!”

“No, I definitely am. Agh, forget it, this was a bad idea, let’s go back inside and pretend this didn’t happen,” Ryuko managed to free her arm and started to stand up, but Mako grabbed her by the shirt, jerking her harshly.

“No no no no! Don’t be mad!”

“What? How could I be mad?”

“W-we were having such a good time and I *ruined* it!”

“You didn’t do anything Mako that was my fault!”

“I just shouldn’t have said anything,” Mako pouted. Ryuko figured the weed might be making her more emotional. If that were the case, Mako would be livid at her come the

morning, as much as that was possible for her.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“But I killed the mood!”

“Nah, nah, see? I’m not going anywhere. We can sit here as long as you want.” Ryuko settled back down to sitting, and Mako relaxed her grip on Ryuko’s shirt.

Mako looked at her again for a long while before saying, “Okay... I can tell you anything, right?”

“Uh, of course?”

“... sometimes I feel like you and Ira are gonna tear me in two.”

“But I told you that I was okay that you were leaving me, right? You don’t have to feel bad about that.”

“No, you can’t decide that!” She said, and then, after a pause, “Ohh, I feel kinda tired now. I’m sorry I yelled at you before.”

“Mako that is A-Okay.”

“It used to be just you and me against the world, and now we have all these great new friends. But I still feel safest when I’m with you. I mean, I also feel safe with Ira, but, well, he’s... you know, I told you.”

“Yeah.”

“But he wasn’t with us then, even though he’s great. And then I feel bad because you went off on your own and I know you get lonely sometimes and then I think maybe Haruka’s not treating you right but then I think I’m stupid for being jealous when I have a boyfriend who I love but then I still wish I could see you every day like we used to but then I’m afraid I’d fall in love with you again and I wouldn’t want him anymore and-and -,”

“ – Mako, Mako,” Ryuko smiled, *sheesh, remind me not to put drugs in this girl’s system again*, she said to herself, *she’s run through giddiness, sappiness, and paranoia in record time*. “I know. I get it. Here, I have an idea.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Let’s just start spending more time together right now, okay? We’ll just sit here, relax, not think about this stuff. Like old times. We’re out here to have a good time, so let’s worry about it later.”

“You mean that?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I don’t mean we’ll do anything. It doesn’t count as cheating if we don’t do anything. And if you still feel like you’re being unfaithful it can just be our little secret,

okay?”

“What? He’s my boyfriend I’m not keeping secrets from him?”

“Right, right, of course not. Well then you can tell him the truth, that you spent a while catching up with your bestie and even though you used to date nothing happened.”

“... Well, I don’t want to get up just yet...”

“Well then, do we have a deal?”

“Sure!” Mako said, and in a very Mako fashion all the tension suddenly evaporated from her and she smiled that radiant little beam of hers. They sat there for a minute or two people-watching before Mako suddenly rolled over. Ryuko’s hyper-senses went haywire and starting firing off at random when she got enough liquor or drugs (or both) in her system so it took her by surprise when Mako was suddenly on her hands and knees, eye-to-eye with her, their noses less than an inch apart. “You have the most special eyes in the world, did you know that? Nobody’s eyes look just the same as yours.”

“Mako, what’re you doing?” Ryuko asked, betraying a little worry in her voice.

“Does snuggling count as ‘doing anything’?” Mako asked with her trademark bubbly innocence

“I don’t think so.”

”Good then! Just don’t try to touch my boobs, okay?”

”I would never!” Ryuko acted scandalized, but Mako just looked confused.

”But you just did.”

”That’s the joke Mako!”

“Ohhhhhh!” she exclaimed, then held up a finger very close to Ryuko’s left eye. “This is gonna sound stupid but... can I touch it?”

”My eye?”

”Well yeah.”

”I don’t see why not.” Ryuko said, and Mako gently moved her finger down until it was resting on the glossy surface of the lens right above Ryuko’s uncanny, gear shaped pupil. She didn’t have anything to worry about - most people would’ve found this quite painful and instinctively pulled their head away, but a minor pain like this was nothing to Ryuko. She let Mako draw a circle across her cornea.

”Man, eyes are very weird, aren’t they?” Mako observed.

”The windows to the soul, they say.”

“You’ve got a pretty soul, Ryuko,” Mako said as she lifted her finger away to show she was done with that, turning around so that she leaned back across Ryuko’s chest, hips in between her legs. It was a position both of them were very used to and they slotted together with months of practice behind them. “Ahh, nice and comfy,” She sighed as Ryuko rested her head on her shoulder and started rolling herself another blunt.

That was how Shiro found them, some amount of time later that Ryuko couldn’t even begin to guess, and as he leaned his head out the door to spot them his eyes narrowed with an inscrutable reaction.

“Oh, uh, there you guys are.”

“Shiro, what’s up?” Ryuko answered. Mako looked like she was almost asleep – she wasn’t, but they hadn’t been moving much.

“Well, I think Satsuki seems just about done here so we’re gonna move on to *S-Tier* now. I already called our driver.”

“You drunk?”

“I’ve had a few.”

“Okay, well keep an eye out, lightweight.”

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryuko shoved Mako off a little roughly and stood up. Mako whined but was quick to follow. “Did, er, did Satsuki ever find anybody she was interested in?”

“... No...”

“Ah damn. Well, get ‘em next time, eh?”

Shiro walked off with a shrug. She thought that meant he wouldn’t tell anybody how intimately they’d been nestled – not that it mattered much, Mako would tell Ira the truth and Haruka wouldn’t *dare* question if they were in an open relationship or not. But he might tell Satsuki, which wasn’t great. She’d probably construe it as cheating, emotional if not literally, and if Ryuko had to guess being seen as a cheat just might be enough to jeopardize her respect.

Chapter End Notes

Only one part of this section left, should be up soon.

Part 5 of: In which Satsuki steps out of her comfort zone

Chapter Notes

Nothing like getting back from a new years party and furiously writing fanfic for a couple hours whoo! (This may have a lot of typos in it so sorry)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ryuko could tell Satsuki was impressed by *S-Tier Rebuilt* by the appreciative smile that crossed her face as they entered and the visible release of tension across her shoulders. It was impressive, that was true enough, an upscale joint if Ryuko'd ever seen one with smooth counters of real stone, plush upholstery that was probably stained by spilled drinks (it was impossible to tell with all the bright lights), and tropical aquariums filled with seaweed and other tasteful decorations that filled the expansive, multiroom club with a lush, jungle green, the alabaster of smooth tropical sands, and splashes of brilliant silver and gold

"You like?" Ryuko asked as she came back from the bar to the gang's table with drinks aplenty. They had brought along the friends they met from *Mary's* – it had been a tight squeeze in the limo but since plenty of them wanted to dance and mingle a small booth was enough for those who felt like getting off their feet. This included Mako, who had been hit with the munchies hard (no surprise, all things considered) and was already tucking into a platter of various fried snacks.

"I think I do," Satsuki smiled back.

"Good, I'm glad you're impressed with the place you saved," Ryuko said this quietly so nobody who didn't know her true identity could hear.

"I can't take any credit, really. If anything, I saved it from myself."

"Sure, whatever, but hey, remember, as much as you've got that you can't go around talking about it, okay? It's enough that they all know I'm here," They'd had to call ahead and go in through a back entrance to avoid paparazzi, and people were still spotting Ryuko. Most respected her privacy, but some asked for selfies or autographs, and Ryuko did *not* want Satsuki's experience ruined by that.

"I know, I know. I shouldn't have to remind you I'm *very* careful," Ryuko responded by slapping her forehead in mock frustration and mouthing "duh". Satsuki chuckled, and asked, "So what do I do here? Should I go mingle, is there anyone you know here?"

"Hold on, first," Ryuko slid over a shot glass, "Snagged that for you, Mei."

Satsuki frowned, "Oh, no I don't think that's a good idea. I already had a couple cocktails, and I just want a few drinks, okay?"

“Well, one extra’s not gonna kill ya, I just think you should have at least one drink here, just to commemorate.”

“Alright, but this is it, okay? I can already feel it,” Satsuki drained the glass, and immediately scrunched her face up in displeasure. “Oh! What on Earth *is* that?”

“Rum!”

“Rum? It tastes dreadful.”

“That’s part of the fun Mei! Now c’mon, let’s go exploring!”

After that, things began to get pretty hazy.

One thing Ryuko remembered doing was staring eye-to-eye with a very large, intelligent looking fish with orange and black patterning that was meandering about in the largest aquarium. She was cooing at it, trying to draw it over with her finger. She was laughing about it with another woman, but didn’t recognize her at all - she looked European. Then there was a memory of recording Mako and Haruka and Houka out on the dancefloor. Houka actually knew what he was doing and was a remarkable talent at it, while the girls fell all over each other giggling.

Then, a bit later, Ryuko was leaning over the DJ booth, the DJ smiling amiably at her as he went about his job trying to pretend the world’s most famous woman wasn’t drunkenly shouting for his attention. Not that he didn’t talk to her, but...

“Yo! DEEE-JAAAYY!”

“Yes Lady Ryuko?”

“Don’t *Lady* me! I ain’t no fancy lady I don’t want anybody treating me any different, okay? That’s official!”

“What can I do for you then, Miss Matoi?”

“That’ss better! No wait! You don’t need the miss either.”

“You want me to call you just Matoi?”

“Er, Matoi, Ryuko, I don’t know man. Look, do you take requests?”

“Sometimes. What would you like to hear? I’m sure I can put it on.”

“Couldja put on some *Regalia* for us, pretty please?”

“I have a *Regalia* song on the up-next already – they’re always a big hit.”

“Nah, nah, nah, I mean like a *lot* of *Regalia*, like a whole album or somethin’.”

“Oh, uh, alright, why not?” Ryuko hung out with him until the first song came on, then grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

“Hey, y’know her real name? Of course you do, everybody does – it’s stupid how she has that stupid fake name. Well Nonon she’s a real good friend of mine, probably one of my best friends. We get on each other’s nerves all the time, but then I was thinking to myself ‘we spend so much time together and y’know what? We have a pretty good time’ so even though she’s a total bitch she’s fun and I like her a lot and she’s very talented and one day she’s gonna be famous. Even more famous. Oh, and there’s a funny thing, little secret trivia for you –,” Ryuko might’ve stood there for quite some time talking at the overwhelmed DJ if it weren’t for Shiro suddenly materializing.

“You should do something about Mei, she’s had way too much,” He said plaintively, “I wanted to take her home but she’s too strong for me and she doesn’t want to go.”

“Seriously? But it’s so early!” Ryuko whined.

“No, it is definitely not.”

“Ugh. Where is she?”

“Over by the bar,” Shiro pointed, and yes, Ryuko could see Satsuki, clutching to the bar for balance with carefully concealed desperation. She was standing next to a couple, seemingly in conversation. Except her mouth didn’t stop moving once. Ryuko focused in her superhuman ears to hear what she was saying:

“Nah, it took me a while to be comfortable with it but it’s definitely girls for me. But, like, I can appreciate the male form, y’know? Like, if I see like a handsome movie star or something I can be like ‘now there’s a handsome man – I’d put up a poster of him in my room’. But having sex with ‘em? That’s just too far, sounds gross to me. That makes sense to you, right?” She directed that question at the man of the couple, but went on before he could answer, “It’s different for Ryuko though, I think she just things... things... bleh,” She stumbled over her tongue, and Ryuko couldn’t help but notice that the cadence of her voice, so relaxed and gossipy like how “ordinary” women talked among friends, was something she had never heard from Satsuki before, “she *thinks* that all men are disgusting. Like she doesn’t trust any of them. But like it makes sense, she used to be homeless and ran with pretty rough crowds, so there was probably *lots* of prevents tried to molest her or whatever... and that’s not even mentioning her *father*.” *Oh dear lord what is she saying!* Ryuko sobered herself up in a flash. Not all the way, but enough to handle things.

“Point taken,” She said quickly to Shiro before darting off, reappearing at Satsuki’s side.

Five minutes and three broken barstools later Ryuko had managed to drag Satsuki down to the limo. Someone captured a video of the moment when, as Ryuko wrapped her arms around Satsuki’s waist to drag her off, she received a nose-breaking elbow to the face and shrugged it off like it was nothing. This would become a much watched, much reported on clip, with people speculating on who this mysterious drunken woman that Ryuko had dragged off was. Some commenters quickly suspected that it might be Satsuki, but most brushed that off as idle speculation. At first, anyway.

On the ride home Ryuko discovered something new: she hated being the soberest person in a room. She'd put Satsuki over on one side of the main couch that ran along the length of the limo and sat herself down on the other, but she'd quickly scurried over to Ryuko's side anyway and was chattering with no pauses for response, same as she'd been for the last half hour.

Ryuko was trying to figure out how much she'd had, count up the number of different drinks she'd seen in Satsuki's hands. It didn't seem like a lot, but then there had been plenty of times that Ryuko'd lost track of her. What was also weird was that her speech and pronunciation still seemed to be just about perfect, save for the change in tone and cadence. She never stammered, barely slurred a word, the only reason Ryuko could tell she was drunk was that she was acting so unlike her usual self. That and the balance, she really was having trouble standing at all. Still, she had to be a real lightweight to be this sloppy even if she'd had a few more drinks than Ryuko counted. *I guess I can't tell if she's gonna be sick to her stomach, but I do know she's gonna be miserable tomorrow morning.*

"So... you never did find anyone interesting, did you?" Ryuko eventually asked, interrupting Satsuki's ramblings.

"Huh? No."

"Damn, that's too bad. I'm sorry Satsuki, I really thought it would work. I thought they'd be all over you," Never mind that there were a lot of girls that were interested in her, and that it was Satsuki who did all the rejecting. Ryuko didn't really remember that.

"Ss'Okay," Satsuki murmured, "I didn't want them anyway."

"Wait, seriously? But – but I thought –,"

"I mean – no wait, I mean, listen. I was against this idea from the beginning."

"Oh no, Satsuki why didn't you say something?"

"Because you looked so excited!" She exclaimed sadly, "I don't want to be out all night, I don't want to get drunk, I'm not like *this*. That's you, not me."

"It's okay, you don't have to. I'm sorry, I won't drag you into going out again."

"I was kind of hoping, though," Satsuki said, alternating between a small, meek voice and gushes of words like she couldn't talk fast enough, "I was thinking, if I were more like you, maybe I would get what I really wanted – it was a longshot, I don't know what I was thinking."

"What you really want...," There was something oddly provocative about that phrase to Ryuko, "Which is?"

Satsuki stopped to make a loud sniffing, hiccupping noise, "Ryuko, what does it feel like to be in love?"

“In love?” *Oh god, where is this going?* Ryuko’s mind instantly went to visions of a teary confession that she’d imagined many times. *But that couldn’t happen, right? No, that’s impossible. But it’s so close, just say the words!* “I-I don’t know!”

“But you were in love with Mako, right?”

“Well, it’s different with Mako!”

“You allways say that!” Satsuki whined.

“Well it’s true! With her it’s like, there’s no barrier. I can say anything, do anything, and she’ll never get upset because she knows how I really feel,” *I guess tonight I actually got that proven to me all over again.* “Maybe that is love, I dunno.”

“...Oh. I’ve never felt anything like that.” What Ryuko could never guess was that Satsuki was reliving all the turmoil of feelings that she’d felt for Ryuko since she’d accepted that her attraction wasn’t going away, and what she found dismayed her. She didn’t feel secure in anything she might do, more like the exact opposite – obsession over whether Ryuko would approve, what she would do in any situation. *Even my deviant fantasies aren’t right. I guess that’s not love, just obsession. It’s so strong sometimes, like I just wish I could be her.*

“Well, what about the elites, your closest friends? Or our family? I mean, it’s not the same, but...”

“I don’t want to have *sex* with them! I don’t want to *marry* them! No, it’s not even close to the same. What’s the difference there? I don’t know but I know it’s there.”

“It’s, it’s, ah hell, I don’t know. Doesn’t seem too different to me.”

“I just though maybe it would work, just a chance that I might feel something. Because I want to, I feel like if I had a girlfriend, I’d be able to fall in love with her. It’s so easy for everyone else. You fell in love right away, didn’t you? But what if I just never do?”

“You’re nineteen Sats. I’m sure you will,” Ryuko said, both amazed and deeply uncomfortable with playing the consoler, the level headed one, for Satsuki of all people. “It’ll happen one day. You’re not a monster.”

“You mean if I can’t feel love I’m a monster?” Satsuki asked, looking at Ryuko with some alarm. She was practically crying now, lost to her inscrutable drunken thoughts. Ryuko kicked herself internally – she hadn’t meant for that to be taken seriously.

“No, no that’s not what I meant.”

“But what if I can’t? I feel like if I did, then that’d be the last thing I need to do to live like a normal person. It’d be so nice to have somebody. But there’s nobody who’ll do. When I looked at those girls and I thought about it, it just wasn’t *right*. I don’t want to say it because they seemed nice but when I see them all I see is *weakness*. They - they just aren’t like us, what do they know about anything?”

“I – I mean I don’t really think that’s fair Sats.”

“They haven’t *seen* the things we have they haven’t *done* the things you and I have. How – I don’t get it, how are you in love with Haruka? You’ve been to *space*, you wore *Senketsu* and you had that special bond nobody can understand but you, and she’s just some girl.”

“Maybe when you go to space and you see the whole world you realize that we’re all just some girl. I’ve never been special Sats, it’s just my luck any of this ever happened to me.”

“No. You were always special.”

“Well whatever. The point is that you’re not gonna get a girlfriend any sooner with that mindset.”

“You know how old I was the first time I had someone killed? *Eleven*. That’s me, that’s my life. But now it’s over, and I – I can’t tell anybody I don’t know what to do now. How could they understand?”

“You can tell me. Sats I understand, we’ve talked about this before, right?”

“But what can you *do* about it? It’s not your job. I wish I could find someone like you who I *could* date. But maybe they don’t exist.”

“... Like – like me?”

“Yeah. Strong, dependable, knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to take it, isn’t afraid to tell you what she thinks.”

“*That’s* what you think I’m like?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not gonna find her this way – let’s face it, I’m a complete novice. I can’t go into those bars I feel like I’m gonna get a sensory overload and I always feel like I stick out. I don’t know how to talk to anybody. You know, I’ve never even kissed anybody before. I’m probably terrible at it. But I couldn’t bear some ordinary girl telling me that, I’m sure of it.”

“I – I mean the only thing you can really do is practice, right? Not just the kissing I mean, all of it.” There was something about Satsuki’s tone, which seemed oddly casual after her outburst moments before, that was deeply agitating to Ryuko. *She’d better not be – oh God, she is!*

“But you’ll be honest with me, right?” Satsuki lurched clumsily forward. Her hands found Ryuko’s hips with a rough vice-grip.

Ryuko saw it coming a mile away. And she knew damn well why she didn’t do anything about it. But what could she do? When their lips collided her brain abruptly stopped functioning.

The past year, as far as Ryuko was concerned, had been some sort of karmic payback from God or the universe or whatever for a lifetime of getting shit on constantly, to saying nothing of the living hell of Honnouji. So it felt like some sort of reminder that life was indeed unfair that this, which should have been the capstone, what it had all been building towards, just – it just wasn't right.

When her thoughts rebooted after a couple seconds Ryuko was faced with the realization that fantasizing about your gorgeous long-lost sister shoving her tongue roughly, passionately, and yet somehow still precisely down your throat was all well and good – but that in practice it was a whole different beast. Not that it didn't feel exactly how she'd imagined – better actually, oh God, it was like lightning, who cared about the noxious rum taste on her breath – but considering that Satsuki was drunk off her ass, definitely didn't mean to be doing this, and might or might not remember it in the morning it couldn't be anything but catastrophic. She pulled away as soon as they paused for a breath. Which wasn't very soon.

“Whoa! Whoa Sats hold up! Please,” Ryuko tried to shy away, but somehow her legs were under Satsuki's body and though she could've freed them without much trouble doing it without hurting Satsuki was another story. She'd been right in her previous guess, though: every inch of Satsuki's musculature was amazingly firm, and it drove Ryuko's hyper-senses wild. She could feel each ab shifting individually. *Wow, she's so strong. I could never compare, I just cheat with the life-fibers.*

She was reminded of the first time they'd crossed blades, not long after she arrived at Honnouji. She'd been unafraid then even though she didn't have a single life-fiber on her and Ryuko was wearing Kamui Senketsu. She was like an angel of death, an otherworldly being. And now look at them!

Satsuki looked like she'd been punched. “Oh no...” She murmured, “I'm dreadful, aren't I?”

“What? No, Sats you're fine, really, but look you just can't – Mmmm!”

“Good,” Satsuki said – and she was back on top of Ryuko. This time she managed to go even longer without pausing, she seemed desperate, aware that Ryuko would try to stop her any moment now. *I'm going to do something bad*, Ryuko thought to herself, *I'm going to assume she's not gonna remember this tomorrow and just go with it for all it's worth now. No, but what if she does? I'd be ruined! Aghh, this is so fucked up!* Despite herself, when Satsuki finally had to breathe Ryuko pulled herself away much more fiercely and scooted back a few feet. Satsuki acted like she was surprised and let out a pathetic whine.

“Jesus Sats this is *not* okay! It's me, *your sister*? We – you – we can't be doing this!”

“Ryuko *please*,” She tried to come nearer again, “I'm supposed to be someone else tonight, right? Just let me, just this once. Just this once.” For a moment, Ryuko was sure she was about to let her in for round three, but she resisted the urge.

“No!” Ryuko backed up even further. Now she was nearly falling off her seat. “C'mon, think about it! It – it isn't right.”

That seemed to bring Satsuki back to her senses a little, and she said in a voice close to tears “Don’t be mad, Ryuko.” *Second time tonight I’ve heard those words.*

“Don’t do that again!” She snarled, and Satsuki nodded dejectedly. They sat in silence for a time while Satsuki slowly gathered herself up into a little ball. Ryuko tried to distract herself from what had just happened by listening to the noise of the traffic sweeping by.

Eventually Satsuki broke the silence with an absolutely pathetic noise like a cross between a chuckle and a sob.

“We’re really awful, aren’t we?” She groaned, “Our mother and father were cousins – that’s not even unusual for our family – then our cousins, brother and sister, I think they fuck each other –,”

“ - Wait, hold on what? - ” Ryuko tried to interrupt her, but it was no good.

“And then our mother raped me and Nui and Rei – they count they’re like our stepsisters – and probably you too when you were in Junketsu -,”

“**WHAT?!**” Ryuko shouted now so loud that the driver called over the walkie-talkie to ask if everything was alright (not that he got an answer). Not that she didn’t suspect that, but to hear it said so plainly when Satsuki would’ve never – and now she couldn’t get the image out of her head. But Satsuki wasn’t phased.

“And now here I am trying to make out with you! I guess it’s only to be expected. We’re like the modern-day Hapsburgs, huh Ryuko?”

“I don’t know who the Hapsburgs are, go back to the part about Ragyo raping you!” Ryuko yelled quickly.

“Ohh Ryuko, you’re lucky you’re so cute because you are just sooo dumb,” Satsuki said with another choking laugh sob, “My only sister and she’s an idiot!”

“Yeah, alright.” Ryuko growled and went back to staring out the window. So much to think about – and she didn’t want to think about any of it. Even though she should have been overjoyed by some of it – her lips would never forget – she would think of her family’s track record with incest and the answer became clear. They couldn’t replay the acts of that *devil* of a woman – no matter what either might want to do they must never be like her. They were already enough like her.

They took the elevator up to the penthouse, and Ryuko plopped Satsuki into her bed without saying goodnight.

Later, when everyone else got back, Ryuko was still awake. She dragged Haruka into their room almost before they’d said hello – even if they were basically in an open

relationship, there was only so far Ryuko could go without feeling a little unfair to the girl. And besides, the nights events had left her with certain unfulfilled urges that Haruka could help with.

Not long after she found herself splayed out across her bed, Haruka's head between her legs, and everything felt back to normal. In that delirious, dreamlike moment right after climax images of Satsuki and Mako and Haruka all swam before her eyes, and she had no idea what to make of them. They might as well have been raw globs of paint, pure colors, for all it mattered to her then.

But when she pulled Haruka up afterward to cradle her in her arms, she couldn't help but laugh at how stupid she'd been. Look at her, her life was full of beautiful women, beautiful women who wanted her and whom she drove crazy. And there were even more out there for the choosing, so easily if she wanted – most boys and boy-like men who fantasized about saving the world would eagerly anticipate the rewards: money, fame, women. She could take or leave the first two, but Mako had taught her that no matter what she had to be honest with herself, and she knew that she would take the women, thank you very much.

So of course, even with so many women to choose from of course she was pining after Satsuki – she was the forbidden fruit! It was so simple that she really did laugh out loud, and Haruka turned over and asked her, “What's so funny?” with a cute little grin.

“Oh, nothing.” Nothing indeed – it all made so much sense now. Not that it would stop her pining, she'd probably never stop, but having an answer why made it a bit easier. Now she knew for sure, the right thing to do was keep it to herself and not give in to this family curse. She could live without fucking just one of the many women in her life, no problem. And then, as she drifted off with relief passing over her, she also realized the simple, brutal answer as to why she'd been in such a bizarre mood that night: she'd just been horny! It was so obvious, and when you said it like that so vulgar, that she was chuckling to herself all over again and had to come up with a funny story for Haruka to stop her from asking again.

I guess even as whatever I am now, I can't get away from the dumb lizard-brain desire to get fucked. That's stupid. I'm stupid. But at least now I know, she thought just as sleep overtook her.

The next morning Ryuko rose early, feeling refreshed and energized as she usually did these days after a night of drinking and recreational drug use (it seemed that when she went to sleep, she lost the ability to voluntarily keep the drugs in her system and her body instantly deleted them all). She started her morning out by making a pot of coffee, jumping off the balcony to see if she could fly yet (not yet), and then playing laptop games until someone else woke up. Today it didn't take all that long for her to detect a set of footsteps approaching the spot in the main hall by the TV where she'd set herself up. It was Satsuki. *Well, time to face the music.*

“Satsuki! How, uh, how are you?” She did not look very well at all. She should have still been sleeping, but of course even a hangover wouldn't stop Satsuki. It was a good

thing she didn't seem to have noticed her hair yet because she would be livid with snarl it had gotten itself into.

"Never. Again." The words were clearly intended as a "Honnouji style" declaration, but they didn't have the same weight when Satsuki seemed afraid to open her mouth lest more than words come out.

"Jesus Sats here," Ryuko stood up, all concerns of whether Satsuki remembered the limo ride home momentarily banished from her mind. The girl needed help. "Sit down, have some water, you'll feel better."

"No! I don't want your – ohh God, I don't –," Suddenly she was clutching at her stomach, struggling to stand on trembling legs.

"Yeah, c'mon now," Ryuko put a hand on her back and slowly guided her down to sitting, then scurried off to get Satsuki a glass of water. She returned in a flash to find Satsuki taking deep, steady breaths to try to stave off the nausea. A greedy hand quickly took the water, and Ryuko sat down once again on an armchair this time, leaving the couch open so Satsuki could lay down. Which she eventually did.

"I cannot believe you," Now that Satsuki was feeling marginally better she had the opportunity to be mad, and she took it, "I told you very clearly I just wanted a few, but no!"

"Sats, I didn't know how bad it was until way too late, okay? It was... It was like you flipped a switch and went from fine to stumbling all over the place."

"Please, you couldn't resist, could you? This is how it always is at these places, huh, you can't just say you've had enough it's always more, more, more! And you just let them wring me dry!"

"Sats, Sats please you gotta believe we would never force you into something like that, you know we tried to look out for ya. It was an honest mistake, we didn't know how quick it would go once you had a few in ya."

"... Maybe I believe you... maybe..."

"Yeah, it was at *S-Tier* right when they put Nonon's music on and we saw that you weren't doing so good, so I called the ride right away and got you home, alright. We took care of ya as best we could. Mistakes happen, right?"

"Wait, when did that happen?"

"Well, I'm not sure exactly, a little after we got to *S-Tier*. No, that's wrong, it was a bit later. Maybe around one?"

"No, I mean I don't remember that at all," The look of dawning comprehension on Ryuko's face prompted a look of rising terror on Satsuki's, "Ryuko, I didn't – I didn't *black out*, did I?"

"Well, I mean, I don't know for sure." Ryuko's heart soared. *I'm in the clear!*

“Oh my God,” Satsuki said in oddly calm tone, which she quickly abandoned, “I *BLACKED OUT!* Ohhh,” She buried her face her hands, “I can’t believe it! How could I have been so stupid?”

“Hey I, I mean, It’s happened to me plenty of times before, it’s really not a big deal so long as you don’t do it too often.”

“Not a big deal?” Satsuki tried to stand up, but settled for sitting, “I don’t remember what I said, Ryuko. I could have said anything! National secrets, insults to world leaders, who knows! Or someone might have me on video doing something that would ruin my public image! Do you know what the consequences of this are? You’re playing with people’s lives here! Our nation’s future. And I didn’t even have much fun!”

“Yeah, I get it, I’m sorry. I won’t let it happen again. But I think you’re fine, I don’t remember you saying anything too bad.”

“We just can’t be that careless. You may not like it, but it’s the truth.”

“Okay Satsuki, I understand. I’m sorry I dragged you into that. I’ll make sure never to put you in that kind of situation again.”

“Okay... I’m going to sleep here and try not to think about this for a while. Can you go someplace else?”

“Sure,” Ryuko gathered up her laptop and began to leave. “Hey, uh, Satsuki?” She asked, “Do you remember anything that happened after you blacked out last night.”

“No, of course I didn’t, I blacked out.”

“Okay, just checking. Sometimes people kind of dip in and out y’know? I just wanted to see if that’s what happened to you.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. That’s not what happened to me. Why, is there something important you wanted to see if I remembered?”

“Ahaha nope!” Ryuko hoped her face didn’t look too red, but that one hit pretty close to the mark, “Just curious is all. Well, that’s fine, I’ll be going now. Do you want anything?”

“No, just get out...,” Satsuki sighed, “I’ve talked enough already. Maybe I’ll feel better, later.”

“Okay, I hope you do. Yell if you need anything.”

“*Never again, Ryuko, Never. Again.*” Satsuki called out right as Ryuko was about to enter the game room. Something about the inflection sounded very specific to Ryuko. She couldn’t help but imagine that Satsuki was talking about the one memory Ryuko wanted to make absolutely sure she no longer had. Or did she want her to remember? *This is why it’s probably for the best if I never kiss her again, or even come close to realizing that fantasy in*

real life. I want to be able to be honest with myself, and this whole thing's just made that way too confusing.

Chapter End Notes

You thought it would be easy? Not in this fanfic, you don't!

In which Minazuki takes an important step

Chapter Summary

Continuing a significant subplot to the overall story

Chapter Notes

Look, I know this one's all about original characters but please don't skip it - it's important. Also, there's some flavor bits about how the cast is perceived from outside their own bubble that I hope are intriguing.

October 2065

Minazuki couldn't believe it. The appeals court had failed them. She'd acknowledged that it was the logical outcome, but that didn't mean she could accept it. Even while a jury full of nobodies passed the sentence to a judge who'd barely scraped by in a back alley before the cocoon sphere she'd held out a foolish hope that somebody would come and save them, make this all go away.

But instead she was left gaping in her seat at the defense block as her dear Takamori was led away to a life in prison. Not even two years ago this would have been unthinkable. She'd given her testimony – dressed in her finest, told them that whatever they thought of Lord Takamori he was certainly not *evil* – but they must not have believed her. Her! It was as if she was already tainted, the jury had already decided against her. What had she ever done to them, she didn't even know any of them! Maybe they believed the rumors about the two of them, or maybe they believed she was in on it – which was worse?

And the accusations against Takamori, they were *so* absurd. Well, not all of them were entirely fraudulent – cruelty to his former subjects, for example – but that didn't mean they were valid. After all, if they were every lord and lady in the country would be behind bars, *especially* Satsuki. *Satsuki*. Her and that little Jakuzure bitch and her spider, the Iori boy. They'd be the first with their heads on the block. Oh, that would be *real* ironic, easy to see why that didn't happen.

But some of the accusations were just beyond the pale. Takamori, conspiring with Ragyo to destroy the world? It made no sense. He was always smiling, even when they were just kids he was always happy, well behaved, mild mannered. Mistreating the commoners

here and there, sure he might have done that, but it hardly mattered, he loved life and he saw the beauty in things. What could he hate in the world that he would wish to die so young? And look at him up there, Minazuki knew what a guilty person looked like and it wasn't him. Guilty people accepted the sentence, saw the defeat coming and took it without surprise. When they pronounced the sentence, Takamori looked *broken*.

He hadn't cried though. She'd had to do that for him.

Sitting there in that dismally drab courtroom with the cracking paint and the warping wooden judge's stand, being stared at by all these commoners who had come together to condemn him, condemn them, Minazuki felt like a page from a history book come to life. The French Revolution, the Bolsheviks, the Secession of the Tristate Commonwealth. She would be next. And they all saw her, they and all the reporters outside, ruining her mascara with tears. Her air of command, cultivated over a lifetime, crumbled with them. But she wiped them away on her own. She had nobody left to do it.

She retreated out into the hall, clicking along past the flashing cameras as fast as her high-heels could carry her, and at last she managed to catch up with them. His slumped shoulders only rose a little when he saw her, his smile had none of the usual luster.

"Oh, Takamori," She blurted, on the verge of tears once again, and tried to throw her arms around him. The buzz-cut, stone-faced guards (they all looked the same, just like Satsuki's One-Star shock troopers used to. Where did she find these people?) were quicker though, and smoothly and quietly raised arms to stop her. They did halt to give them one last chance to speak, though.

"Sister dear," Takamori murmured, "I'm so sorry. It – it really pains me you have to see me like this." He motioned as best he could to the sandy brown stubble creeping across his face, the loose, pale skin that had once been smooth and tan, the dark circles under his shining blue eyes. Prison had not been kind to him thus far.

"That doesn't matter. At l-least I *can* see you. Takamori, how did it come to this? I tried to tell them, but -,"

"I know, but it doesn't matter. She won is all," He chuckled mirthlessly, "She's made quite a habit out of that, hasn't she?"

"You don't mean..."

"You know who I mean, I'm afraid."

"But-but why? Why would she betray us like this?" Minazuki struggled to wrap her head around it. She knew Satsuki had been only too happy to abandon the rest of the Kiryuins for her new family, but she'd been hoping for months that someone would explain why. Theirs was an ancient and noble bloodline, Ragyo aside, and now far too many of its members were aging and frail. The young Kiryuins now numbered less than ten, and they

needed her. So why, why would she let the line die? She didn't believe Satsuki's newfound love for "the people" for a minute, she knew her better than that.

"Mina, please don't say that too loud. Listen, I've got one day left until they ship me off to the super-max. If you want to know what this is all about, please come to the prison. It's going to be out last chance to talk freely."

"... Okay..." Minazuki nodded. And just like that they were off again. She took the moment before the reporters caught up to wipe away her tears again, straighten her back, try to recapture her iconic haughty glare. Then she set off for home with new resolve. So, Satsuki *was* up to something, her suspicions had been right. And now she had to know. If Marie Antoinette had been warned about what was coming for her, she'd have done something about it too.

For the first hour, they talked about nothing important. How the relatives were, how the estates (the ones they didn't have to sell) were doing, and other such nonsense. Minazuki almost couldn't stand it; she'd been waiting since the early morning since Takamori didn't give her an exact time. And when she'd seen him for the first time, well:

"What have they *done* to you?" She'd asked with a gasp. Dark bruises knotted up on Takamori's forehead, there was swelling above his right eye and a long cut on his nose.

"This? It's nothing, I did it to myself."

"I don't think I can believe that."

"It's true. I was introduced to my new warden today, one Ira Gamagoori. Let's just say I got a little carried away."

"Oh. My. God. So it's true, they really are sending you to the super-max."

"I'm afraid so, it doesn't look like it'll be a picnic. They say Gamagoori is quite the psychologist, wears his victims down slowly. Not just beatings either, they say he has... other means," He said, with a grim sort of fire in his eyes like it would be quite cool if it was someone other than him going in there. Maybe he thought she would find it inspiring, his manly self-sacrifice. Stupid man. She wanted him out, weak or strong, that was what mattered.

"But you won't let that happen, will you?" He wasn't getting out though, so she could at least get some solace from believing that he would stay strong to the end.

"He's got the rest of my natural life to try, so who knows."

"And this Gamagoori brute... I suppose he's in on it as well, isn't he?"

"In on what?" Minazuki and was taken aback when Takamori looked at her with seemingly genuine confusion. Then he went on, "I've been meaning to ask you, have you had to sell any of the horses up at Mayfeather Hollow yet?" and she got it. She wasn't

stupid, it was obvious when you thought about it that there were security cameras. So she had to wait, wait an hour until Takamori abruptly interrupted her.

“For the next five minutes,” He said, “there will be a system reboot for the security cameras. It’s a very lucky thing it’s Inamuta’s day off, he would never allow such negligence when it came to a high priority prisoner. Still, not a lot of time so I’ll be quick.”

“Okay. Please.”

“My arrest, imprisonment, and my defeats at both the normal and appeals courts have all be carefully orchestrated by our dear cousin. But I’m sure you knew that already.” Minazuki nodded. “What you don’t know is why. On the news they call all the changes in our country a “people’s reform” – getting commoners back into the government and restoring equality and democracy. But make no mistake: all the levers of power are completely in the hands of Satsuki Kiryuin and her inner circle. My arrest was part of a shadow purge of everybody with the legitimacy to oppose her rule over the masses. The Takarada heir is in her pocket, has been since the Tri-City Raid, she exiled the rightful inheritor of the Jakuzure dynasty in favor of her little puppet -,”

“- that bitch, I should have known -,”

“- The story is the same for all the other houses. And now she’s going after her own blood,” He spat. Terror gripped Minazuki. It was her worst fears come true. She’d hoped Satsuki was just plotting to use this as leverage against them, offer Takamori his freedom in exchange for their undying loyalty. It’s what she would do. But this... just... how could she be so heartless? Was she really such a monster, like mother like daughter?

“But I thought her goal was to save the world, wasn’t it?” It clearly wasn’t, but Minazuki needed him to go on, explain what it *really* was.

“Oh please, you’ve known her as long as I have. Tell me, do you really believe she’ll be satisfied now?”

“... No. No, she wants it all, doesn’t she?”

“Ragyo was only a stepping stone for her, and you know what her endgame is – her flag flying in every city across the globe. Do you think it’s an accident that the first thing she did after the crisis ended was get world leaders to absolve her of her war crimes, while the memory was still fresh? Why, what do you think the purpose of those lunatic followers of the Matoi girl are for? They’re to spread discontent and revolt in the masses around the world, prime them to accept Satsuki’s rule.”

“Of course. So, Matoi’s in on it too? I don’t know what I expected,” When she’d met The Girl Who Saved the World at a party back at the start of the summer, she’d seemed nice but... a little off. Just the same as Satsuki, she’d been nice but a little off too, as a child. Until she started on the Honnouji project. Then things had gotten worse. And now that it was all over Minazuki had been wondering, eyeing her with suspicion, trying to see if she really had changed or if the megalomania was still there under the surface. She believed Takamori, of course. People didn’t change.

Takamori chuckled mirthlessly, “You’re catching on. Okay, not much time left – so I’ll just say this: the girl’s a living weapon – not human -,”

“- Not human?”

“She’s the same kind of thing Ragyo was, an artificial human made using life-fibers. She was designed for warfare, that’s the whole of her purpose. You think she can rest easy now? That’s like expecting a dog not to chase cars. And she has Satsuki’s ear closer than anyone else, if you know what I mean.”

Minazuki nodded, grimacing in disgust. She’d suspected the rumors about them for some time. *So, you’ve taken a new lover, have you Satsuki? I thought you were trying to destroy life fibers, not bed them.* “So, why tell me all this? I mean, what can I do?”

“Is it not enough that I want you to know what’s coming?”

“I suppose.”

“Well, even if it is that’s not all,” Takamori smiled, the first smile he’d put on that seemed genuine except the one he’d given her when she first entered the visiting room. “Out of all the charges against me that led to this, there is one that is true: I am a member of a secret organization dedicated to opposing Satsuki’s tyranny. I would like for you to meet with them, continue my fight. Of course, that’s only if you’re willing,” Minazuki nodded furiously – there was no other choice! “Good. I’m going to pass you a note with an address where you can meet an associate of mine. Memorize it, then destroy it. I will warn you, we do use life-fibers in some of our weaponry. That’s all they’re good for. But if you’re comfortable with that then please travel there. Any time will do; they’ll find you.”

“Okay. I’ll do it. For you.”

“Thank you. There’re just a few seconds left to the reboot now so it would be best if we went back to small talk for a little while after that before you left. But – one last thing, Minazuki– I love you so dearly. Please, promise me you’ll think of me as I was before.”

“I – I will,” She stammered, “I love you too!”

She waited at the spot – an abandoned warehouse on the edge of Tokyo bay – for hours in the dimming light. Fortunately, she thought to bring a few security guards because the neighborhood wasn’t exactly the safest. Roving bands of young men wandered by, and she could only tell the ones that were part of Satsuki’s new police force from the gangsters if she could see their needle guns – the most omnipresent symbol of the new order.

She was starting to get worried that she’d come too soon (she’d basically headed straight over after meeting with Takamori) when an unmarked black van pulled up down the block. At first, she was a bit hesitant, but a relieved smile broke on her face when a familiar figure exited. A portly, jowly old man with deep bags under his eyes and a toothbrush moustache. He gave a low, formal bow when he reached her, and she waved a hand telling

her security guards to calm down. Then, just in case one of them might be a spy from Satsuki, she dismissed them.

“I know you! You’re Tajiki Kuroido, former steward to the main Kiryuin line!”

“Lady Minazuki,” He quavered reverentially, “It is good to see you once more.”

“We all thought you had passed away. It is a relief to see you alive and well,” She motioned him to stand.

“Circumstances with your cousin have made my safety less than guaranteed in public. I only wish I could have returned to the rest of the family sooner.”

“That’s alright, my brother has informed me. So, I have come to fulfil Lord Takamori’s wish that I continue his fight. I trust there is a place for me in your organization.”

“My lady, you have nothing to fear. Please, if you’ll accompany me. We have already prepared a seat befitting of your stature.”

“Excellent,” Trembling with a mixture of excitement and relief, she followed him into the van, where a tray of cocktails was already waiting for her. “I’m so glad to find this wasn’t a false lead, Kuroido. I feel... I feel like this is the path I should have taken from the start.”

“I hope we do not disappoint. My lady, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you into REVOCS.”

Meanwhile, Takamori Kiryuin smiled to himself in his cell. He didn’t have any outside communication with the rest of REVOCS, but he didn’t need it. He knew that at that moment Minazuki was moving along the path, fulfilling her destiny. His dear sister might not understand now what lay ahead for her, but she was smart. She’d figure it out, understand why it was all necessary. She would become their greatest champion. Satsuki would never expect it, all her plans would be laid to ruin at Minazuki’s hands. She would be the one to end Matoi’s reign before it began, and avenge Mistress Ragyo.

In which Ryuko has a close shave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2065

It was a lucky thing that Ryuko was a light sleeper even with Haruka there, or she might have missed the scratching noises from her balcony in the small hours of the morning. As it was, the sound was unmistakable – there was someone out there. She sat bolt upright. The scratching stopped. A shadow froze behind the shades. A normal human could never have perceived it, but for Ryuko there was no doubt left, she knew what was happening. *They're here to kill me.*

She didn't hesitate. Off the bed, through the sliding glass door with a deafening shatter, her hands found his neck in an instant. The struggle was brief. Ryuko held the man off the ground, and though he groaned through his mask he still had the resolve to thrust a dagger into her heart, soaking the balcony in blood. Of course, she didn't flinch, but there was another one coming, this one right down onto her skull. An offhand slap crumpled his arm, sending the knife clattering away. Haruka was shrieking, clawing the sheets up in a paltry defense.

"Capsule, capsule, capsule," Ryuko muttered desperately, squeezing the assassin's jaw until it popped open with a crack and a strangled howl. He flailed about with the arm that still worked, stabbing her chest over and over again. Fountains of hyper-pressurized blood sprayed across the room, but the wounds closed, and Ryuko still didn't react. She remembered a line from Satsuki about how these guys usually had a cyanide capsule in their mouths in case they got caught, and... there it was! A blur of fingers whisked it out from between his tongue and gumline as blood began to pool there. Momentarily satisfied, Ryuko released the assassin and he collapsed across the bloodstained floor, moaning pathetically. She crushed the capsule in her palm and stared at him. Then the reality of the situation hit her.

That was the moment when the door slammed open and in burst Satsuki, pistol in one hand sword in the other, eyes wild. She was in time to see Ryuko gingerly slide the knife out from her belly and turn towards her with wide eyes.

"Ryuko!"

"I – I got him," Ryuko said softly, but the panic stricken look on her face filled Satsuki with indignant rage. With her mind still clouded by sleep and shock she really believed for a moment that her worst fears had been realized. She couldn't tolerate it. *No. This does not happen to Ryuko Matoi. Not in her own home. Not under my watch. Not ever.*

“Bastard!” She stalked over and planted a mighty kick right into the man’s chest, curling him into a fetal position. That didn’t stop her from launching another one, and another one, “Who sent you! I want names, now! Who!”

“No! Stop! Ryuko make her stop!” Haruka shouted desperately from her perch on the bed before breaking into panicked sobbing. The doorway was filled with Ryuko’s friends, the other tenants, who were struck silent by the scene. “He can’t talk, his jaw! Please! She’ll kill him!” Ryuko wasn’t listening though. Well, not to Haruka, anyway.

“Three more. I hear them,” She vanished off the balcony. Satsuki gave the assassin one last brutal kick before tossing her weapons to the ground with a seething, “Ughh!”. In the time it took her to do that Ryuko was already back, scrambling over the balcony somehow with a body in each hand. Both were clad in the same all-black bodysuits the first one had been wearing. One was obviously dead – foaming at the mouth – but the other was limp with no signs of major injuries. Ryuko tossed them to the ground without ceremony, explaining, “That one got to his capsule so that’s it, this one I knocked out. There was another, but he fell, wasn’t pretty – uff!”

“Ryuko! I thought -,” Satsuki threw her arms around Ryuko and pulled her close, clunking their heads together. After that shock, it felt so safe in her arms that Ryuko just wanted to go right back to sleep then and there.

“Sats, chill out, I’m alright,” Ryuko said with a weak smile. It took nearly a minute, but Satsuki breathed a sigh of relief. “Didn’t even hurt.”

“Of course you are,” She smiled, “what was I thinking?” She didn’t even know herself, and when she came to the awareness that Haruka and the rest of Ryuko’s friends were watching she burned with embarrassment. Satsuki Kiryuin was always in control of the situation – now she had to make up for that burst of overwhelming protective instinct and take charge.

“Aw, I got blood all over your, ah, your front,” Ryuko said as they parted, revealing a blotchy, roughly Ryuko shaped red stain all along Satsuki silky nightgown, as well as a few scraps of her pajama shirt that decided to hang on.

“It’s fine,” Satsuki said, clearing her throat and addressing the onlookers at the door, “Alright, nothing more to see here. Return to your rooms, my security team is already on their way to secure the building,” Then, as they began to depart, she turned to Ryuko, “You broke his jaw, not to mention what you did to his arm. He’s no good to us for now, nor is the man who died. Still, you did manage to secure one of them alive and unharmed. This is good, he may confess to us who sent him.”

“Yeah, sure, sure,” Ryuko looked distracted, “Hey Haruka can you run get some... the cleaning lady or something? Maybe call the carpet vacuum guys?”

“What!” Haruka cowered, tears still all over her face, “I-I’m not going out there! The-there might be more!”

“Haruka!” Ryuko shouted, “God dammit I said I got them all! Go!” Haruka responded by glaring at her, sheets pulled up to her mouth. Satsuki, however, had understood that Ryuko wanted to say something to her in private. She leaned over the bed with a gentle smile.

“You kept your cool even when I didn’t,” She looked Haruka dead in the eyes with a glare that said *make no mistake, this is an order*. “You’re tougher than you look.”

“Whu?” Was Haruka’s only response. Satsuki brushed her cheek, smearing tears together across it. She tried to pull away – in that moment she was ten times more terrified of Satsuki than the assassins. She’d seen a side of Satsuki she’d only heard of before, and it terrified her. And the way she and Ryuko had stood there, foreheads pressed together, practically breathing into each other’s mouths, dripping with blood, it was bizarre and... uncomfortably intimate.

“It’s been a rough night for all of us. Would you please help Ryuko out?”

“O-okay,” Sufficiently coerced, Haruka finally got up and crept from the room.

“Now, what is it?”

“Well, look,” Ryuko held out her hands, “Their knives, do you see?”

Satsuki did see. Glossy black like obsidian, their knives glinted blue and white in the dimly lit room. “Hardened life fibers. Two per-person. They knew your weakness.”

“If they’d gotten to me, then they really could have done it,” Ryuko said in a quiet voice. Her face burned with shame, thinking about all the times she’d jumped through the jaws of death before. What was one more? Just because she’d thought she was safe now, that she was beyond being killed, didn’t make in any different, did it? *I didn’t realize just how comfortable I’d become believing in my own immortality. I want that back!*

“Oh Ryuko,” Satsuki pulled her in for another deep embrace, rubbing a hand across the back of her head. Normally she might have been surprised at how shaken Ryuko was, but at this late hour she didn’t need to. She just wanted Ryuko to feel better.

“Stop that. I’m fine,” Ryuko muttered. But she made no move to leave her sister’s arms.

“These delays are unacceptable,” Satsuki fumed, pacing back and forth in the lab’s break room, “Ira has provided us with the location of one of their bases. We should have Nonon down there right now counterattacking, but you tell me we’re still months from Saiban’s completion.”

“We could always send the conventional military,” Shiro suggested. He was the only one up at this early hour that Satsuki had chosen to pay a visit. He’d already been apprised of the situation – his computer had popped up an alert about it not five minutes after

Satsuki's security team had arrived at the penthouse and taken the assassins away. This was good, though. Satsuki was used to talking strategy with him; he could keep up, if not outpace her.

"No, if they can make hardened life-fiber blades then their technology is likely well developed enough that even with Nudist Beach technology victory is not assured. I won't throw away men's lives on a mission with high odds of failure."

"And that would certainly let the news out about REVOCS, which we've been trying to avoid this whole time."

"Where are they getting the funding to make such strides? If it were wealthy supporters in the country, we'd know by now."

"We believe America and Russia. They see us as a threat, and likely hope that internal strife can eliminate us before they have to get their hands dirty."

"Nothing to be done about that for now except dismantle REVOCS as fast as possible. Well, what about Ryuko? I don't think it's a good idea, but..."

"... She's still not as powerful as we'd like, not yet anyway. She could do it, maybe. But this may have been bait intended to goad Ryuko into attacking, so they may have a trap to capture or defeat her."

"They do know her weakness."

"I am so sorry for that. I don't even know how they would know."

"It's fine. Ragyo must have left them with more data than we thought... No, it wouldn't work. I think she's still too shaken, anyway. Understandably," Satsuki shook her head in frustration, "She shouldn't have to live like this! We've turned her home into a fortress – constant in-person security patrols – she doesn't deserve this. But what can I do? You know as well as I do, we have to protect her at all costs."

"Personal matters aside, she's still too important to the hybrid project to let her risk herself in the name of comfort."

"That is a personal matter, for you."

"Humanity's future is a personal matter?"

"This is getting off topic..." Shiro was so dispassionate sometimes that even Satsuki couldn't understand how he functioned. "They knew our security well enough to slip through without disabling or triggering the alarms. That means there must be a mole."

"It is bad... If they're confident enough to attempt something like this..."

"But for the moment our security is good enough; we must play defense. We can survive. I'll double bodyguards and surveillance on the Mankanshokus, Ira's and your families, Houka's mother, anybody else they could use to get to us."

“I appreciate that,” Shiro said. His parents knew very little about what he was up to, and he didn’t want to scare them unnecessarily. Down here he was quite safe, but if they got held hostage...

Satsuki smiled, a strained little smile, “I’m only telling you this because you’re my oldest friend, Shiro, but I’m not ready for this. Look,” She held out a handful of her lustrous hair, “I’m only nineteen and already I’ve got grey threads.”

“Well, that’s not stress, that’s genetics. And technically they’re not grey, they’re white.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It’s not working?” Shiro said, smiling thinly. Satsuki hum-chuckled a little bit.

“I was expecting a least a year or so more to plan our next move. A little down time isn’t too much ask, is it?”

“If it’s any consolation, I think you’ve done an admirable job picking up from a plan with an endgame you weren’t intending to survive.”

“Hmm.”

“... We could try the beasts, you know.”

“Would it work?”

“I’d say odds are about the same as using the army. But at least this way we wouldn’t be putting anybody’s lives at risk.”

“... Show me...”

Rippling grey fur over lumpy, misshapen bodies. Long spindly legs and lashing, whiplike tails. Mouths full of serrated teeth that seemed to be fused together. Skin crisscrossed by scars that glowed with a faint light from inside. These wolf-sized creatures that stalked about not five feet from Satsuki’s face (although one of those feet was completely filled with bulletproof plexiglass) were like nothing she had even seen before. Monsters.

“And these,” she murmured, “Used to be rats?”

“Yes. When implanted in newborn animals life-fibers will not kill the host, but accept it and hybridize with it. When this happens to non-human animals they will attempt to rapidly transform the creature into a suitable host. But with humans, they spent millions of years evolving the species into an ideal form; attempting the process within the lifespan of a single rat produces... well, things like what you’re seeing. We’ve been calling them hybrid beasts.”

“I see. And the bones you have in storage, those are from hybrid beasts made with other animal species, by REVOCS, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, we recovered them from Ragyo’s tower at the end of the war. We’ve got lions, buffalo, crocodiles, eagles, even a small whale. General trends seem to be about a hundredfold increase in body size, development of weaponized body parts, and increased intelligence and aggression. We only kept the small animals alive because we couldn’t transport the others safely. About five of these are from REVOCS, we made the other fifteen here to test the premise.”

“And they have powers similar to Ryuko, or another human hybrid?”

“Similar. Here, I’ll demonstrate,” Shiro pressed a button and a hatch in the ceiling opened; a large slab of meat was lowered on a cable from its dark recesses. Instantly the rat-hybrids were aware of it, and when it was still more than thirty feet from the sod floor several of them sprung at it with flying leaps, latching on and digging into it like vultures, kicking at each other and chittering. Within seconds the slab was reduced to shreds which rained onto the ground, allowing the others to quickly scoop up their fill. Satsuki watched with interest despite the gruesomeness. *Such savagery, and yet they cooperate and make sure they’re all fed. I’d expect nothing less of a creature created from the life fibers.*

“Oh dear, one’s making a break for it,” One of the smaller rat-hybrids was scrambling up the cable towards the hatch, its legs wheeling about like a spider’s. It didn’t get far before the cable disconnected from the meat and quickly whisked back up – too fast for it to hold on. Its escape foiled, it dropped back to the dirt with a dull *thud*, but moments later got up, completely unhurt. “They have enhanced strength and speed – nowhere near that of a Kamui, a hybrid human, or even a three-star uniform – and also regeneration. However unlike Ryuko’s theirs is fortunately not infinite; you could gun them down with enough conventional rounds, and Nudist Beach needles will quickly stun them. Still, I have no doubts that if you threw them at the REVOCS base they would tear their way through until they died or killed everyone inside.”

“So they could be trained?”

“Only rudimentally. Say, to attack specific targets. It’s an imprecise instrument, but at this point they are expendable, we aren’t making more. Unless you wanted more, that is.”

“Tell me, is the implanting process painful?”

“The implanting? No, it doesn’t seem to be. The transformation, on the other hand...”

“I see...”

“So, what do you think?”

“I think they should all be put down. They’ve suffered enough.”

“With pleasure,” Shiro nodded with a grim smile. Houka would be thrilled – he pitied the things, and understandably so. It would also be nice to get the kennels back to use for other things. “Our enemies won’t be so humane, you know.”

“I know. We will have to inform Nonon that she may face enemies such as these.”

“So, what will we do for now?”

“For now? We must bide our time and accelerate work on the Kamui. You should begin phase two: construction of bonded Kamuis for Aikuro, Uzu, and any other member of our inner circle who wish to wear them.”

“Yes, certainly, but...”

“... is it time or manpower?”

“Both? I don’t think the four of us can get all that done efficiently.”

“Well, you’ll have to find a way, won’t you? This can’t be the most difficult thing I’ve asked of you, can it?”

“Frankly, without my tailor’s regalia, putting a man on mars would be simpler. Relying on the robot arms to do the knitting is a serious handicap. If only we had the ability to work with the life-fibers directly, but – wait, we know someone who does, don’t we?”

Satsuki saw where he was going and smiled, “And she’s been showing prodigal skills in her fashion design class lately.”

“Hmm. Ryuko Matoi, seamstress for the next generation of Kamui? How fitting. Would she agree to it?”

“I have a good feeling.”

Most group meetings at Ryuko’s penthouse were pretty relaxed affairs. Maybe two housemates were having a tiff that needed to be resolved, or maybe something had gone missing and everybody needed to help look for it. Whatever the reason, the problem would be solved in five minutes tops and then they would order delivery. Not today though. Today they had to deal with the events of last night.

“Look,” Ryuko addressed her gathered friends. She’d increased their numbers over time, now there were twenty-six of them (which was still only two-thirds of the bedrooms filled). Rich and poor, from Tokyo, greater Japan, and even other countries, they came from all walks of life, united by Ryuko. There were even a few couples, some of whom had met each other because of Ryuko, and that made her glow with pride. They all looked at her seriously and expectantly as she went on, starting to choke up, “I wish I could tell you that shit like that won’t happen again. But I can’t promise that. It’s dangerous to be around me, that’s just the kind of life I have to lead. So I understand if you – if you feel like you can’t

live here anymore. I – I just wanted to say that, and to not feel bad, and I’ve had a great time with you all and I-,”

“Ryuko, you don’t have to do this,” One of the girls, captain of the school’s volleyball team, said gently.

“Huh?”

“We already talked about it. None of us are going anywhere.”

“You – really?” Ryuko asked tremulously, and they all nodded in agreement. After today, Ryuko had been sure the penthouse would be lifeless and empty again, but they – they didn’t care about the danger! In truth, none of them would ever forget the sight of Ryuko, dripping with her own blood, pulling the knife from herself without even a wince. How the red in her hair twinkled with a million little lights, blending into the mesmerizing colors of the city skyline behind her. You didn’t just run away from something like that. Amazing things were happening here.

“Yes. We thought, well, what kind of friends would we be if we left now?”

“You guys...,” She said, bursting with gratitude. She wouldn’t be abandoned again, not now, maybe not ever again!

“And besides, I wanna see what happens next!” One of the guys exclaimed as he stood to give her a hug. Some of the others laughed in agreement, “I mean, it’s gonna be somethin’, you have to admit. You with that knife, you were like the terminator!”

“Hey, c’mon now,” Ryuko chided, although she was smiling too, “This is serious!”

“I know, I know. But still, you were awesome!”

“And Satsuki too holy shit - such a badass,” Another guy said, “Although, remember how I asked for her number once? I don’t think I want it anymore.” That got some laughs too, and Ryuko found herself chuckling too. How nice it was to have friends like these! Now that the tension had been broken, she went around to all of them and thanked each personally with a tight hug that left them sputtering. Soon, some of them wandered off to play games, someone turned the TV on, and Ryuko was asking the volleyball captain if she wouldn’t mind ordering some pizza for everyone (on Ryuko’s dime, of course). It was like nothing had changed, except that below it all the rumble of the carpet vacuum working hard to scrub out Ryuko’s blood was audible from upstairs.

The only one who looked even a little unhappy was Haruka. She’d never seen Ryuko so vulnerable or scared before, never seen her seem to need another person. She realized that day that underneath her powers Ryuko was just as human as anyone else, and she just didn’t know what to make of it. What she did know, what worried her even more, was that when Ryuko was at her most vulnerable it had been Satsuki she turned to, not her.

Chapter End Notes

I am now also posting this story on fanfiction.net (I hadn't been before because I don't like their UI as much), so if you got this far in and for some reason want to switch over there you can. I'll still consider this the main version though.

In which Rei stirs up trouble

Chapter Summary

Ohh boy it's the Rei chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2065

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She'd expected to die that day. Counted on it, actually. Blind fury drove her to rush Satsuki with her knife, but there was a brutal, simple logic to it too. She would kill Satsuki, and the Mankanshoku girl if she had time, then Ryuko would burst in and kill her. If there was one regret she had then, it was that she wouldn't have time to savor the look on Ryuko's face, one final "fuck you" to the girl who had taken everything from her. But then Satsuki had done something insane. She should have seen it coming.

And now here she was, almost a year and a half later to the day, taxiing down the Tokyo Airport runway in a commercial airliner, pursing her lips in a vain effort to fight down the nausea brought on by all the low swings and skips of the gigantic plane. She'd only been on an airliner once before – Ragyo insisted on private jets and helicopters only – and the experience had been about the same. A mental note that commercial flights didn't work for her.

As the other passengers rose to disembark, she couldn't help but watch them. She'd never really looked at people before but now it seemed to be all she did. If only they knew that if this inconspicuous little woman had gotten her way back then, they would all be dead. Once, she might have said that it wasn't death, just oneness with the life-fibers. That they told their underlings that some portion of their identity would survive because they were lost fools, just as lost as everyone else, and didn't understand that the self was meant to be shed to fulfill their destiny. Now, well, she knew better.

These people had uniformly dull, worn out faces, even most of the children, but that was to be expected – they'd just been on an international flight for nearly a full day. Still, underneath that there was a sort of eagerness, a drive. Probably just to get off the plane. No, it was more than that. They all had places to be, something that drove them halfway around the world. Family, business, vacation (as much as one could vacation these days), frivolous things, she would have said, once. They cared, so that made it important, and the importance was the key. Which was why she was even more eager to escape the stifling cabin than any of them. She had the most important job of all.

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“Rei Hououmaru,” She thought she was mistaken at first when she heard her name, but there was Satsuki in the flesh, with Jakuzure at her side and a subtle flanking of bodyguards posing as airport patrons around her (Rei only even noticed them because she knew what to look for). She had never thought she would describe Satsuki as down-to-earth, but it fit now – from the way she’d been casually chatting with Jakuzure to her subdued wardrobe to even the subtle shift in her posture. It was all a reminder that she was different now. Had she always been like this, hiding it from Rei like she hid so much else? No, they’d grown up together; Rei had no doubts that she had loved the trappings of power, loved to feel better than the rest of humanity. Now, she was just one in the crowd milling around the exit doors. Nobody even recognized her, their nation’s *de facto* ruler, but in fairness that was probably because whenever she appear on TV she always wore the exact same gown.

“Lady Satsuki,” Rei bowed.

“Please, call me Satsuki,” She smiled, “How was your flight?”

“Not great, but bearable.”

“Hmm. I am sorry for the... just bearable accommodations.”

“Oh, no that’s quite alright. I understand,” Using commercial flights instead of private was a necessity, Satsuki didn’t want to draw any attention to the fact that Rei was back in Japan. Or that she was hiring her as her personal assistant. It was just bad optics, to be seen in public with an old enemy who also conspired to destroy the world. Not that people would turn on Satsuki just for that, really it was more for Rei’s protection against harassment, death threats, and worse. There were plenty who still saw her as the enemy. She couldn’t blame them. She didn’t believe people could change either, until she saw it with her own eyes. “And how are you, Miss Jakuzure?”

“I’m good,” Nonon piped with a nod, “And you can call me Nonon. I like your hair.”

“Oh, well thank you,” Rei fluffed one of her buns – deep brown now, not lavender, “I thought it was time I went back to the natural.”

“Nonon will be playing a key role in some of our... er... higher level projects,” Satsuki commented, and Rei picked up – mostly from the uncertainty in her tone – that she was talking about life-fiber research. Satsuki had told her way back during the Geneva Trials that there were plans to continue the work, trying to develop new Kamuis and the like, but she still seemed to expect Rei to disapprove. As if Rei didn’t know better than anyone alive how far you could go with life-fibers, where the line was. But then she’d be nervous too, considering that part of Rei’s job was to put Satsuki down if she ever went beyond that line. Went beyond that line *irredeemably*, that is, because she knew Satsuki’s heart was in the right place. All Rei had to do was make sure old habits didn’t die hard. Sounded simple when you forgot that the future of the country and possibly the world depended on Satsuki becoming the leader she needed to be.

“Well, I’m sure you’re tired,” Satsuki said, noticing that Rei was spacing out a little, “We’ve got a car waiting to take you to your apartment. Don’t worry about your luggage – we’ll have someone see to it.”

“Oh, no, it’s alright. Actually, I’d kind of like to start working now. What is it here, twelve? I think I can make it until the end of the day,” Satsuki’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but Rei wasn’t planning to back down on this one. “I’ve read all the files, I’m ready.” She’d actually read a lot more than what Satsuki had sent her, poring over books on economics, sociology, history, anything to fill in all the gaps in her knowledge. Rei’s skills, as far as she knew, were purely in the practical, the administrative realm. Ragyo would never leave the big-picture to anybody but herself, so now that Satsuki was expecting her advice on such matters she had to brush up.

Not like there had been much to do in Geneva anyway. Between visits with her psychiatrist she was basically cloistered in a hotel. A nice hotel, but still. She was ready, she was tired of people treating her like an old, finicky landmine – ready to explode at the slightest provocation. It was well past time to do something productive, be a normal person for a change. And besides, she didn’t want to go to her new apartment just yet. Her single suitcase contained all her worldly possessions. She had nothing to fill the empty rooms with.

“Well, we certainly can accommodate that,” Satsuki said with a smile – not that she gave any outward sign but Rei could tell she was a little nervous about this, maybe hoping to put it off another day, “although I must warn you that our first order of business today is lunch with the director of our Aeronautics Research division – not exactly in-depth work.”

“That’s quite alright with me.”

“Well then excellent,” Satsuki said, turning to go, “I’m sure you’ll still find this meeting very interesting, Hououmaru.”

“Oh please, call me Rei.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki made one of her trademark closed-mouth humming chuckles. *That’s a noise I think I’ll be hearing often. She seems much better than the old Satsuki, not to mention my old boss.*

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“So, what’s on the docket for this afternoon?” Satsuki asked, scooping up a dainty mouthful of rice from her bento box.

“We’re working through lunch today?” Rei asked, not at all because she was upset by the concept, just to make conversation. This was in the third week after Rei’s return to Japan, and the two of them had settled into a comfortable routine. They sat across from each other at Satsuki’s wide desk, and unless the day was particularly busy or they needed to leave the office lunch was about the only time they took a break from seemingly endless paperwork, meetings, phone calls, and other such tasks. And then Satsuki would go home and do more. Promises and visions for the world’s future aside, it was nice to know Rei was there for a reason – Satsuki *really* needed a personal assistant. How had she managed to

make it as far as she had without dropping? It was amazing, really. She was like a moving statue – tireless, constantly serene.

“Well, we can make a dent in the easier memorandums, can’t we? Ryuko invited me over for dinner and a movie night, so I’d like to close out a little early,” Satsuki explained (“a little early” meant at seven p.m. instead of nine), “If I have to cancel that’s alright, but I’d like to try.”

“You’ll make it, I’ll ensure that. I can take some extra home if it comes to it,” If Rei had learned one thing about Satsuki so far, it was that she valued whatever free moments she had with her friends, especially Ryuko, more than just about anything else. Rei found it oddly adorable. She couldn’t remember a time when Satsuki had enjoyed anything besides winning a sword duel; she was too happy for her to even be jealous. She hadn’t earned friends like that yet anyway. She put down her sandwich (Rei, although not technically a Kiryuin Foundation employee, ate from the catering service that provided lunches for the office – top notch stuff – whereas Satsuki just brought a box of leftovers) and started scrolling through messages on her laptop.

“That’s not necessary and you know it. It’s like Ryuko says: we make time to enjoy life in between our work, not instead of it.”

“She said that? That’s... quite wise,” Satsuki loved telling about things that Ryuko or Mako or Uzu or someone had done or said, and Rei didn’t point out that all her stories were second-hand. She understood well enough how it felt to be the least fun person she knew (not that she knew many people). Not that she didn’t have stories, oh she had stories all right, but they weren’t the pleasant kind. And Satsuki knew them all, anyway.

“Well, I think the phrase she used was “all this crazy shit”,” Satsuki pronounced the words like she wasn’t quite sure how. But I don’t think I’ve diluted the message too much. What, why’re you giggling?”

“Oh, it’s just – it’s funny to hear you say that. Not part of your usual vocabulary, you know.”

“You mean my quotidian lexicon?” Satsuki shot back.

“Yeah, yeah that’s more like it,” Rei chuckled, “Let’s see. Well, if you want easy – we’ve got a petition here from a conservation group to immediately ban all whaling and shark finning in the country.”

“There are still some whales left?”

“Evidently.”

“Well then, we’ll approve that immediately. We’ll have the police step up patrols in the harbors to stop any illegal activity as well,” She declared, then stared expectantly at Rei.

“What is it? That’s all for this one.”

“Oh. Well, I just expected...”

“You expected there to be some lobbyist group from the whaling industry responding to that? I took the liberty of seeing them out myself. I figured you wouldn’t want to be troubled with such trifles.”

Satsuki smiled, “You learn fast.”

“Oh, well thank you. Now let’s see about some more easy ones,” While Rei shuffled through her messages, a loud pinging indicated that Satsuki’s secretary was calling over the intercom. She pressed the button to let it through.

“Another news station calling about the incident in Chiba,” He said, and Satsuki sighed, shoulders hunching just slightly. This incident was only the most recent in a series of thorns Satsuki hadn’t been able to get rid of. It began with the policy of her new police force to move the homeless who were sick or high on hard drugs to homeless shelters – harmless enough on its own, but all too often they took people without properly informing their families where they were going, or maybe giving them wrong information. Either way, people couldn’t find each other, and then the rumor-mongers got started about Satsuki “disappearing undesirables” and people started snooping around. This time, a young man looking for his uncle tried scaling a fence into a restricted area and got shot. It was only with stunning needles, but the fall still killed him. And something like this was just bound to happen again, no matter what condolences Satsuki sent.

“Save the number, I’ll take care of it in an hour or so. If they really need a statement now, have them call my lawyer and he’ll issue the same one as last time,” She said, and he pinged back that he understood. Satsuki picked at her rice – she hated being reminded of these failures. In a moment she’d be fine, but Rei was frustrated. They’d been having such a nice conversation, work aside. But then, maybe there was something she could do to help. That’s what a good assistant should do, right?

“Ugh, that’s a rough one.”

“Just more time out of my day. Can’t be helped.”

“You look tense though! Here, let me help,” Rei stood up, pushing her laptop aside.

“Hmm?” Satsuki hummed quizzically.

“Shoulder massage. I actually honed the craft in Geneva, not much to do there really, so I got lots of practice.” This was true, she had practiced on some other hotel guest from time to time, but it wasn’t like she hadn’t already acquired this skill before that. But she could put it to better use now, right? That’s what she was doing with her other talents.

“Oh. No, that’s alright.”

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised,” Rei said with a confident smile.

“...Well, if you insist, what’s the harm,” Satsuki conceded after some consideration. She sat back as Rei crossed around the desk and kneaded into her shoulders.

“Wow, your shoulders are just two huge knots!” Rei exclaimed after minute or so, “Are you sure you’re sleeping right?”

Satsuki tried to respond, but first she had to let out a big, gruntlike exhalation. “Don’t hold your breath now, alright?”

“Sorry.” Satsuki hadn’t really meant to hold her breath, really, she just wanted this experience over as quickly as possible, but Rei couldn’t guess that. Satsuki knew full well that she had cultivated this skill to please her mother. The idea that those dexterous little hands were performing the exact same motions as they had back then was making her deeply uncomfortable, relieving though it was.

Rei, on the other hand, was too lost in the work of it. Never before had she had the chance to work on such a perfectly formed body, nor one so tense. Since first laying eyes on her she’d known Ragyo was the most perfect creature, but now Satsuki edged her out. Ragyo, in retrospect, had been too angular, too... exaggerated. Satsuki wasn’t the same, despite feeling just as shapely. And she smelled nicer too, a more subtle perfume than her mother would be caught dead using. The subtlety was the key really. Yes, she was incredible, capable of incredible things, but she kept all that hidden just below the surface. Rei was so grateful to have the chance to serve her, to see what Ragyo *should* have been.

“Rei. Rei! What are you doing!” Satsuki was suddenly completely stiff. Rei snapped open her eyes in surprise. Oh god, what *had* she been doing? Without realizing it, she’d begun leaning further and further over Satsuki. Her hands had crept down to her sides, their heads practically next to each other. Why, her lips had stopped mere inches from Satsuki’s neck! It was too familiar a motion. Her whole body felt like it was constricting in upon itself.

“I – I’m sorry!” She leapt back, face flushed, stammering because there just was no rational explanation for it. She had been acting on pure instinct, but her instinct was *horrible*. “I – I didn’t mean to, I swear! It – I just - ,”

“Rei - ,”

“T - There’s no excuse, I know, I’ll – I’ll just,” she hurried scampered back over to her seat.

“Rei!” Satsuki said, a little louder, fixing Rei with the same sympathetic look she’d worn when Rei rushed her in the defcon system. Rei stopped, thinking, *I’m doomed now. And I’m the one who was supposed to be keeping tabs on her!* “It’s fine, really. Why don’t you go home for the day? I’m afraid you seem a bit worn out yourself.”

*Yes, yes that’s it, if we both agree to believe that lie then I have my way out!* “Yes, maybe that would be best... But you’re sure you’ll be alright on your own?”

“I’ll manage somehow.”

“But Ryuko...”

“This won’t be the first time I’ve had to cancel on her. She’ll forgive me.”

“Okay...” Rei said, taking a deep breath, “Okay. I think I will go home, take a nap maybe. We’ve been running pretty ragged lately, haven’t we?”

“We have.”

“Okay,” Rei gathered up her things, “I’ll be back tomorrow, better, alright?”

“Don’t even think about doing any work until then.”

~~~~~

Later that evening, Rei lay across her bed in her still mostly empty apartment, staring up at the contact info of her psychiatrist back in Geneva for longer than she cared to admit. She’d said to call her whenever she needed, if anything came up. Something had definitely come up, but Rei just couldn’t bring herself to do it. She was a grown woman! She’d been through worse on her own.

At first, it had been the struggle to make sense of all the contradictions in her head. Everything Ragyo had promised: oneness with the universe, the ultimate bliss, a destiny. Everything she had been: pure and good and beautiful beyond compare. And then on the other hand, the cold, bland truth. That all of that was a lie. It had been good to have someone to talk her through it all. She had so many questions, that one fateful day had thrown her entire world into confusion. But she’d gotten through it, now she knew the truth and was happy in it, or so she thought.

But then this, this thing she’d done without even thinking about it. Another lie, but one she didn’t know she’d even believed. *This was just what you did for your boss when they were stressed out, you made them feel good, no matter what.* That was the lie put into words, but how could she have known she’d had it burned into her skull? What else was back there she couldn’t remember? What more might it make her do, thinking it was normal, thinking she understood what was expected of her?

And the way Satsuki had looked at her was maybe the most infuriating part of all. Like she knew exactly how she was broken. Because she was broken, she couldn’t be normal, Ragyo had taken all that from her long ago. And now she got that same look from everyone. How could she tell them that, though she was glad they cared, their pity got her nowhere? Even a psychiatrist, how could she help any, especially across an ocean?

Eventually she put her phone down and went to sleep.

~~~~~

It took several weeks to Rei and Satsuki to feel comfortable having pleasant conversations with each other again. It helped that they were both too stubborn to avoid each other. But telling who felt more uncomfortable during those weeks was a task beyond either of them.



## Chapter End Notes

This one's been tricky because I don't think anybody has spent as many words on Rei as I'm planning (hell, I don't think many have spent as many words on her as I do in this chapter alone). I've got some ideas for her which I think will be great, but because there's so little about her in the show she practically an OC, just informed by a couple lines in the OVA. So it's important that this first part sets her up well, which is why it's more "in her head" than I'd like just so that we're covering everything. To that end, if you have any thoughts on her I would absolutely love to hear them.

Oh yeah and writing characters with psychological problems you have no personal knowledge of is always iffy so if you think I've penned something insensitive Lmk.

## **In which Mataro suffers a betrayal**

November 2065

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Mataro thought he was getting better, but he couldn't prove it until he noticed how much easier stairs had gotten. The first week, he'd had to clutch the banister and probe with delicate little passes of his feet because he couldn't gauge the height of each stair. It had only taken him one bad stumble to scare him out of trying to rush up like her used to. But that was months ago, back when he couldn't even tell where he was going and every day his fingers itched to claw the blindfold off, even if it meant giving up. Now he had the heights at school and in his apartment complex down to muscle memory, and anywhere else he could just listen to the position of the footfalls from someone else climbing them and up he went!

Which is why he was a confused when, darting up to the second floor on his way to class, there was a stair missing. But then there was a leg under his ankle, and it made sense. He hit the ground hard. Now this was something he was having more trouble getting used to. Jeering laughter surrounded him as a meaty boot fell onto his back.

"Ohh, hey guys, how's it going?" He groaned. One thing he had given up on was trying to keep his voice deep, it just took too much concentration that he needed for gauging his surroundings. It was as shrill and scratchy as ever – if it felt like dropping sometime soon, he'd sure appreciate that – but that hardly mattered at the moment.

There were worried gasps and shouts from onlookers, which he appreciated. At first, he'd been worried that everybody would write him off as a weirdo, but all he had to do was explain that he was learning shingatsu from Uzu and it went from bizarre to extremely rad. It helped that he still dressed sharp as ever – had to make it clear that he was still going places. In the end it worked out oddly well; he was ten times more popular as "the guy who ran track blindfolded" than "Ryuko Matoi's brother", he was actually doing something interesting himself. But with all that extra popularity came extra enemies. Once, he'd been considered one of the better brawlers in his class and wasn't afraid to prove it. And now he couldn't fight back, so it was only natural that people took advantage of it.

"Well, if it ain't little Stevie Wonder," A familiar voice sneered. By the tone, Mataro guessed that his face was split by an ugly, gloating grin.

"Kinzo? Ahh, what the hell man, you jumpin' ship?"

"Not much of a ship you got anymore, bud."

"What? Who've you got there?" There was shuffling around him. Kinzo wasn't acting alone. They never did, even though he couldn't hold off even one of them.

"Oh, just a few of the guys."

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” He groaned, “You traitors!” At this point he had to just accept this was happening. It hurt a little, he hadn’t loved his old friends, but they were fun to be around. But then, there were lots of people who wanted him in their cliques now, and he had Satsuki and Uzu and all the rest in his corner. So who needed them?

“Fuck off! You’re the one who transferred in and started lording yourself over *us*. We had a good thing going *before* you came along. Just cuz your family adopted The Girl Who Saved the World doesn’t mean you aren’t still an asshole!”

“Wow, big talk, you been rehearsing that one?”

“Man, shut up!” One of the others yelled, “You’re the one on the ground!” A vicious kick connected with Mataro’s abdomen, but he’d sensed it coming – heard the foot lift off the ground, felt the rush of air. He took it without flinching. If there was one thing he’d learned from Satsuki so far, it was how to take a hit. He wore long sleeves and pants even on hot days to hide all the fresh bruises she left each morning. At first, he’d thought that she would ease up, start teaching him basic techniques, but that turned out to be Uzu’s job (not that he wasn’t decent at it, he didn’t run a dojo for no reason). All she did was show him how vastly unprepared for a real fight he still was. Over and over again. Against her, it was a victory if he managed a few blocks. Another kick came, and another, but he relaxed his body and weathered them all like a sandbag until he heard a frustrated shout, “The fuck’s wrong with you!”

“Weakass kicks, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah?” Kinzo grunted, “See how you like this!” Rough hands grabbed Mataro’s shoulders, pulling him upright. Kinzo threw a punch towards his gut, but whoever had been holding him made the mistake of letting him stand on his own, and as soon as he was up, he was moving. He weaseled his way out of the punch, shimmying his wire frame just slightly to the side. *Ha! Compared to Satsuki these guys are so slow!* He heard the overhead swing coming from someone behind him too and slid forward to evade it easily. What he didn’t see coming was the follow-up elbow from Kinzo, and he was back on the ground with a grunt. He still couldn’t keep up. Uzu’s words rang in his ears:

“You’re wasting your own time doubting yourself, you know. Shingantsu isn’t about using your other senses as your eyes, it’s about using your senses, period. Your body knows what it’s feeling, all the doubts are coming from your head, and until you understand that you’ll never achieve shingantsu,” Uzu was a fan of these short, declarative phrases that seemed to make intuitive sense to him. Mataro understood the idea just fine, but as far as actually putting it into practice he was still falling infuriatingly short.

“So what am I supposed to do instead?” Mataro had asked, frustration ringing in his voice.

“Think about this: when you’re using your eyes, do you need to think about what you’re seeing?”

“Uh, sort of?”

“Really? So you ask yourself ‘what’s that thing in front of me? Oh, a chair. What color is it? Oh, brown?’ every time you see anything? That’s what a drunk person does.”

“Alright, alright I guess not.”

“Exactly. You just use them. And think about this: I’m talking to you right now, but do you need to spell out every word?”

“No?”

“Right, you just know what I’m saying, natural as that. So, why is it any different to tell where my Shinai is? I’ll give you the answer: it’s not. Your body knows exactly where it is. You’re just tricking yourself into thinking it doesn’t.”

“So what do I do?” Mataro asked again.

“It’s simple. Stop thinking.”

“Stupid bitch,” Kinzo grunted, grabbing Mataro’s collar and pulling him up again. This time his fist connected, right onto Mataro’s nose. A brilliant red starburst filled his blindfold, a dull ringing in his ears. Still nothing compared to Satsuki. *You’ll have to try better. Don’t tell me this is all you’ve got.*

“Hey, c’mom,” He squeezed on Kinzo’s forearm, but he couldn’t detach it, Kinzo was just too much bigger than him, “This shirt’s new!”

“Shut up! You with your stupid jokes, you think we’re playing around here?”

“A little? I thought you could at least make it hurt. I mean *come on*, you’re fighting a blind guy.”

“Oh, that does it!” He was really getting under Kinzo’s skin now, just by that snarl he could envision brows scrunched in rage. “I don’t have to put with your shit anymore! You want it to hurt? You got it!” Another punch. This time it felt like a lightbulb had shattered on his face.

“Anymore, huh?” He said with a morose laugh, “You pussy.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re only doing this because of my blindfold, aren’t you? Heh, I shoulda known.”

There was a moment of hesitancy from Kinzo, and the others stepped back. *Good. An upperclassman should be here to break this up any moment now.* Mataro knew he had heard a girl running off to get help when the fight had started.

“Am not!” Kinzo screeched desperately. The others seemed to be taking unconfident steps back, suddenly aware how cowardly they all surely looked.

“Hah! I wasn’t wearing this, you’d never dare! I’d take you all down and you know it!”

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that!” A rough hand seized the black cloth right above the bridge of Mataro’s bleeding nose. Searing light poured in as it scrunched up, and he slammed his eyelids shut.

No!

Mataro could have spent that instant freaking out, deeply regretting having provoked Kinzo this far, worrying if Satsuki would take him back after this. But his whole body was swinging like a pendulum in Kinzo’s grasp, and he knew just where to direct all that motion. It was like he could see again - there he was, plain as day, and there was Mataro’s boot swinging up with deadly precision, right between his legs, hitting home with a fabricky *thunk*.

For a moment his entire world was swallowed up by Kinzo’s horrified, squeaking groan, the chorus of excited “Ohhhhh!”s from the onlookers, and the various sensations of his body and Kinzo’s hitting the ground together. But this time nobody was pinning him down. He was up and running, imagining Satsuki’s shinai or Tsumugu’s fist closing in on his neck. He rushed at the shortest of the punks surrounding him, focused only on not giving them another chance to grab at his blindfold. The guy he charge was still too shocked by this sudden turn to make any attack, but the guy to his right made a desperate grab at him. It was all too easy now, he tiptoed out of the way of the swinging arms with a cocky little laugh and slammed into his target like a football player.

“What the fu-oof!” He didn’t stop to check if he knocked him over, and instead scrambled over him and kept running. He left his books behind (they were just for show anyway since he couldn’t read at the moment), and only managed two solid hits, but judging by the overjoyed reactions from the crowd that now parted around him, he’d scored a massive victory nevertheless. He cackled to himself as he left Kinzo and his lackies in the dust. This would be a day they wrote about in his biography. This was the day Mataro Mankanshoku first felt the power of Shingantsu.

Part 1 of: Ryuko Matoi, as seen on TV!

Chapter Summary

And this one we wade into the full fledged weirdness a little bit. Part of my mentality is that if the events of this wacky show happened in real life the entire world would lose their shit, and I want to write about that. Also the show leans on the quasi-spirituality pretty hard so it's not entirely off-tone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November 2065

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“Sats, sit down. All that pacing’s making people nervous,” Ryuko said, managing to talk in a fairly normal sounding grumbled despite the five sewing needles she was holding in the side of her mouth.

“Well, I do have places to be, you know, and I’d expected to be on my way by now.” It was a normal Saturday morning at Ryuko’s penthouse. A few tenants were milling about at various stages in the process of making and eating breakfast, others weren’t up yet or were out of bed but still half-asleep, and there was a group that had gone to the gym for a morning workout. Ryuko was sewing in front of the TV, a giant box of spools of thread she’d borrowed from her fashion design professor spread out in front of her on the floor, Haruka nearby watching (mostly her but also the TV).

The only difference was that Satsuki was still there, whereas usually she was gone before anyone else woke up, if she was even there at all. She stalked around on her phone, trim black skirt-suit and impeccable grooming clashing with the sweatpants and disheveled hair of the college students surrounding her. She drew plenty of looks, everyone wondering what important business she was about to embark on, but acknowledged none of them, choosing instead to cast impatient glances towards the sky-blue gown Ryuko was working on.

“Sheesh, you gotta chill out. It’s Saturday!” Ryuko said defensively, hooking the needle she’d been using between her teeth and selecting another one with a thread of ever so slightly darker blue thread trailing from it.

“And the nation of Japan doesn’t stop existing over weekends.”

“Yeah, well aren’t there like other people who work for the government? Like, a guy whose actual title is Prime Minister? Aren’t you like, not even technically a government employee?”

“That may be, but do you *really* not grasp that there are things that only I can do, both as former leader of Honnoujji and, for what it’s worth, head of the Kiryuin House? Or would you rather do it?”

“Ugh, fine. But don’t rush me anymore, okay? Y’know I spent all yesterday to find the exact color match for this.”

“I could have sent it to the tailor’s and had the rip gone by last night. You’re supposed to be a prodigy.”

Ryuko growled in frustration, glaring at Satsuki and wishing that for once she would just take some much needed down time. Haruka watched nervously; she hated these fearsome squabbles that occasionally sprung up between Ryuko and her regal friend. It was so unpredictable – most of the time they were downright sisterly or engaging in one of their creepy stare-offs Haruka assumed only people who’d seen some real hell in their time would understand – but then all of a sudden one of them (usually Satsuki, she thought) would start being unreasonable. And then she desperately wanted to leave the room, especially now that she’d seen firsthand what they were both capable of when provoked. She muttered something about how this wasn’t worth fighting over, but they didn’t listen.

“You said you wanted it perfect, so I’m giving you perfect. Better than the *tailor*, anyway,” Ryuko spat derisively. She had no idea where this talent with a needle came from, and frankly she didn’t want to think about it, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t proud of her handiwork. “That takes time, I thought you’d get that.”

“Just... get it done...” Satsuki sighed.

“Y’know, why am I even doing this? Can’t you just wear something else?”

“But this is my favorite dress,” Satsuki said plaintively, seeming to acknowledge that it was a foolish statement.

“You have, like, five of the exact same thing!”

“No, I mean, this one in particular.”

“But they’re identical?”

“I can assure you, they’re never *exactly* identical. So, I’d like this one back in working order, if you don’t mind.”

“Yeah, right.” Ryuko went back to examining the rip she was sewing up. It was a nasty one, several inches long on the back side of the knee and the calf, with lots of loose, frayed threads that had to be removed on the edges. “How’d you even do this, anyway?”

“... I snagged it on a banister.”

Ryuko looked at her pointedly. It would have to have been one hell of a banister to leave a rend like this. A knife, on the other hand, or a large bullet...

“I did, really. It could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Right. Well whatever, it’s gonna take a few either way.”

“Oh please, I know you’re stalling on purpose. You should know I can just as easily have someone pick it up later.”

“... But you’re still here.”

Satsuki made an exasperated noise in her throat. It was a terrible thing, how easily Ryuko read her stress. She half wanted to tell her all about it, but there were too many unauthorized ears around. And she really didn’t have the time. It wasn’t like she was unused to working past exhaustion, anyway.

“... C’mon, sit down. It’ll just be a little while longer,” Ryuko said in a conciliatory tone. Satsuki realized she was serious when she went back to working, and eventually complied, settling down to observe as Haruka flipped through the channels antsy. They sat there in a tense sort of peace for a few minutes before something on TV caught Ryuko’s attention. She sat up with a start, dropping a needle from her lips (it didn’t fall far before her lightning quick fingers snagged it from the air, though).

“Whoa, hey, go back!”

“What, what was it?” Haruka asked, fumbling the remote and scrolling back a couple channels.

“On the news! I just saw me!” Haruka found the channel and – sure enough – there she was, on a screen behind a pair of newscasters. It was an old picture, one of the few high-quality ones of her wearing Senketsu that existed. She fixed the camera with a steely gaze, but the present day Ryuko’s face went white. Haruka cranked the volume so everyone could hear.

~ “Chaos continues to envelop the Vatican City and other areas of Rome today as Matoiists and loyalists clashed in the streets. This morning, a car bomb claimed the life of the new pope and several high ranking officials as violent mobs of Ryuko Matoi’s followers infiltrated the city’s defenses after weeks of siege,” ~ the newscaster piped somberly as footage flashed by – hordes of black and red robed figures flooding narrow streets and clashing with another mob who fought desperately to hold them back, blood dribbling through cobblestones, haze rising from burning cars and old stone buildings, a cacophony of screaming and gunfire. ~ “This is only the most recent in a series of civil wars that have broken out around the world as Matoiists unite in an effort to force the world to recognize Ryuko Matoi, The Girl Who Saved the World, as a religious figure.” ~

~ “That’s right Kenji,” ~ His cohost nodded, ~ “Matoiists in Italy have been particularly aggressive since the old pope was assassinated for declaring Lady Ryuko to be the messiah in late July. It’s split the country, indeed most of Europe, in two.” ~

“Sounds like Uzu got out of there just in time,” Satsuki observed tersely, scribbling notes in a little black leather pad. It was a good idea to keep an eye on the news, see how this stuff was being reported on. Ryuko nodded absentmindedly, keenly aware that all eyes were on her



and the growing agitation visible on her face as she watched violence carried out in her name. Replica scissor blades held aloft over a pile of bodies. “This really ought to have a graphic imagery warning on it,” Satsuki added, “I’ll get the ball rolling on making those required.”

~ “Now, we actually have an exclusive interview with one of the leaders of the Matoiists currently besieging Rome, one Alessia Di Donato, is that right?” ~

~ “Indeed it is,” ~ The cohost responded, then she fixed the camera with an inense, conspiratorial look, ~ “This footage was taken outside the city, a few days ago. At the time, the Matoiists were in a stalemate with the Vatican City’s private guard and the mobs of loyalists, so not everything is completely up to date.” ~

~ “Well, I’m certainly very interested to hear what she has to say, nevertheless. Let’s roll the clip.” ~

~ “Translated from Italian:” ~ A generic announcer’s voice read before the screen cut to show a woman standing on a sandy hillside. In the foreground behind her there was a wide camp in which the robed cultists bustled urgently, in the background huge steel walls surrounded the ancient city’s domes and shingled rooftops, which smoldered under intermittent artillery barrages. It was an incredible sight, whoever filmed this had an eye for shot composition.

Alessia herself cut an intimidating figure: a tall, stocky european woman with wild eyes and cross-shaped scars on both her cheeks. She wore the same robes as her comrades, and under close inspection it was clear that they were rough, patchwork things with thick, scratchy threads. And that she was naked underneath them – in fact, they all probably were, not that you noticed it much. Only the depth of her cleavage gave it away, it actually covered more skin than Satsuki’s bathrobes. Ryuko almost liked the look of her, she certainly seemed capable and charismatic. But those eyes, they were the eyes of a fanatic. She started babbling in an incomprehensible stream of furious Italian before the flat, emotionless translator came in over top of her.

~ “Why we do what we do? It’s simple. Mistress Ryuko is obviously the daughter of God. She emerged – out of nowhere, in our hour of greatest need – and struck down the embodiment of sin and privilege with divine power. How can the fools doubt it? It’s not *Revelations* word for word, but nobody said it would be literal.” ~

~ “So, what does that mean for what you’re doing now?” ~ the man behind the camera asked. He didn’t actually seem to be a member of the cult, which meant he must’ve been quite intrepid.

~ “We take Mistress Ryuko as an example in all things. It’s clear there’s a great change occurring in the world now, and I don’t know what she has in store for us next, but we must put our faith in The Lord and be ready. What I’m sure of is that we will be judged harshly if we do not punish the corrupt and privileged in our own country, whose greed turned our once lush and beautiful land into a desert. And there is nobody more corrupt than the ones cowering behind those walls!” ~

~ “And the civilians?” ~

~ “If they have seen the light, they will come to our side and be embraced with open arms. But if not, then they side with the privileged and shall be dealt with accordingly.” ~ At this point there were a couple more sentences that seemed to be much more vehement that didn’t get translated (Satsuki understood some of them, and scowled at the vicious threats).

“I don’t understand why they’re showing this,” Satsuki grumbled, but nobody else talked, except the newscasters.

~ “Certainly a very motivated young lady,” ~ the newscaster named Kenji quipped with a chuckle, then continued more somberly, ~ “It is chilling though, truly. Violent Matoiists rarely negotiate, rarely even make demands. Myself I’d say we’re quite lucky we don’t have their type here in Japan.” ~

~ “Oh I’d agree. Alessia’s not alone in believing Lady Ryuko to be some sort of supernatural being – messiah, deity, demigod, what have you – although beyond that there appears to be little to no unity between their philosophies. People from many faiths – Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and others – have all interpreted Lady Ryuko in this way, but each one put their own spin on it. In Japan the Matoiist movement is completely nonviolent, although there are reports of injuries as a result of overcrowding at their demonstrations.” ~

~ “Possibly because they aren’t at odds with the people in power.” ~

~ “Well, certainly. After all, she lives here.” ~

~ “Right. Although little is known about *how* she lives. In her only public appearance all she asked was that we respect her privacy, and she has practically no social media presence. What we do know is that she appears to live in a large penthouse in the Tokyo area – for the sake of her privacy we won’t say quite where – and attend Tokyo University. She associates with a small circle, mostly influential figures from Honnouji like Lady Satsuki Kiryuin, Lord Uzu Sanageyama, and Lady Nonon Jakuzure. She *has* been spotted at nightclubs around Tokyo as well – again, we won’t say which.” ~

~ “And you can frequently see her patrolling the city late in the evening, intervening on crimes and accidents.” ~

~ “Yes indeed, I suppose you could call that a landmark of the city by now.” ~

~ “Well, I think it’s only natural to be curious about her, considering how mysterious she is. Even the origins of her abilities are poorly understood. At this point it is unknown if she has any contact with her religious followers, although considering her lack of social media use and the divisions between them, experts consider it unlikely.” ~

“Contact with them?” Ryuko grumbled, the pressure building in her ears to a boiling point. Until she couldn’t take it anymore. *This isn’t what Senketsu died for.* “They’re right outside my door right now! Alright. I’ve seen about enough of this.” She put down Satsuki’s dress and pulled out her phone. Something had to be done about this. “These guy’s studio is here in Tokyo, right? Ah, yup, here it is?” She stood, grabbing a jacket and throwing it over her tank top.

“Ryuko? Where are you going?” Satsuki asked.

“I’m gonna go down there right now and fix this. I’m gonna tell that crazy chick and all the rest to knock this shit off. I’ve got a good feeling that if I ask, I can make them send my message to the whole world.” She exited onto the balcony, leaving everybody watching to talk amongst themselves. She was balanced on the railing, stretching her legs in the blustery fall air, when Satsuki called out to her.

“Ryuko!” She shut the balcony door, and Ryuko had a good guess that she didn’t approve, even though it made no sense. Wasn’t the new Satsuki all about doing what was best for the world?

“Yeah Sats?”

“I don’t think you should go. It won’t work.”

“What? Didn’t you hear her? These people think I’m Jesus, I think if I tell them to stop killing, they will.”

“Didn’t *you* hear her? What she said about privilege and corruption and ruining their lands? This is a conflict that’s been brewing in her country since long before you. I’m afraid you’re just a symbol for them to rally behind, a figurehead.”

This gave Ryuko pause. It was a good point. *Dammit, why isn’t anything ever simple! How the hell do you know what people will do, anyway?* “Still, I have to try.”

Satsuki shook her head, “It isn’t about you, Ryuko. And even if it was, is it really right for you to intervene in other people’s lives? This might be what their country needs to progress.”

“Oh, as if you don’t intervene every damn day.”

“I don’t. I’m very careful. Which you should be now.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I know what I’m gonna say. You think I’m gonna have a meltdown on live TV?”

“No, but consider this: let’s take the afternoon, come up with a good statement for you together, then I’ll get a press conference together this evening. It’ll come out much better that way.”

“Nah, I’ve gotta do this now. Nobody’s gonna die because of me. Not if I can help it.” Plus, judging by the reactions of her friends inside they thought the idea of her hijacking a live news station was pretty fucking cool. And they were right. It was bound to draw attention, which only meant her message would spread even faster.

“I’m won’t stop you Ryuko,” Satsuki sighed, smiling sadly, “It’s a noble idea, really. I just worry it will only lead to frustration on your part.”

“Well, I won’t come crying to you.”

“I’m sure you won’t.”

“And who knows? Maybe you’re right. There’s only one way to find out.”

“Well, take care Ryuko.”

“I’ll be back before you know it!” And with that, she sprung off the railing with a rush of air, landing on the rooftop across the street and speeding out of sight.

## Chapter End Notes

Part 2 (/2) should be done like tomorrow or soon. I thought I would just make this one part but I'm too tired to finish it now.

## Part 2 of: Ryuko Matoi, as seen on TV!

### Chapter Summary

And now for the actually interesting part of this one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the following fifteen minutes the news station continued their discussion of world news, moving on to less thrilling topics like the ongoing chocolate shortage and yet more petty skirmishing between the (formerly) United States and another epidemic ravaging Southeast Asia. They were about to move on to traffic and weather when both newscasters looked offstage quite suddenly, shock and amazement playing across their faces as though a cameraman had sprouted an extra head.

“Hey, you guys, she’s there!” One of Ryuko’s friends who had posted watch in front of the TV shouted and quite soon all the seating was full as everyone crowded around. Satsuki hadn’t moved since Ryuko left, but now she sat forward in her armchair, watching intently. Someone was talking into the newscasters’ earpieces, and Kenji responded.

~ “Yes, I know, I – Really? Well of course, of course, send her on – what? Oh, sure,” ~ He looked up at the camera and cleared his throat, trying to regain composure, ~ “Ladies and gentlemen this is... this is an extraordinary development. We have with us in the studio *the* Ryuko Matoi herself, and she’s come here – by herself – through the window, actually – to uh, to go on the air and say a few words -,” ~

~ “– Nah, I’m fine as I am, really. Nooo makeup, these clothes’ll do,” ~ Ryuko could be heard offstage, brushing off murmurs from a director or somebody. ~ “And I think I’ll live without water, too. Look, just make sure the entire world sees this and I’ll be happy.” ~ Her friends started chuckling even before she hurried onstage to escape further harassment. When she appeared from camera left, they all cheered, and the newscasters stood up like they weren’t sure if they should bow or salute.

~ “– Uh, Lady Ryuko.” ~

~ “Oh you guys can stay,” ~ There she was, projected eight feet tall across her own living room, addressing the newscasters casually, completely unaware that they were live. ~ “I’ll be out of your hair in a minute.” ~

They backed off to seats on the sides of the broadcast desk, leaving Ryuko to take the center. As soon as she sat down there was a blinding red-orange glow that filled the center of the

screen as though Ryuko had a sun for a head. Something, either the lights or the cameras or both, was having a bad reaction to the twinkling of the red undersides of her hair. All that could be seen of her face was a blurry profile and a nervous smile peeking through the radiant light. Satsuki couldn't help but chuckle. *The Kiryuin glow does take some growing into, I suppose.* Nevermind that hers was artificial, a simple trick of spotlights, whereas Ryuko's was something else entirely.

~ "Uh... testing... testing... Hey! What are you guys doing?" ~ She shouted as another spotlight zoomed over her face, beaming onto it from a different angle as the crew tried to make the image presentable again. ~ "It's fine, leave it." ~ Eventually they did manage to rein it in a little, making Ryuko's face visible. Still, the tiny sparkling lights didn't quite go back to normal, beaming out tiny little orbs that scattered lens flares across the screen. The crew went quiet, and Ryuko looked around expectantly for someone to tell her she could start. The entire studio stared back at her.

That was when it dawned on Ryuko both that she really was about to speak in front of the whole world and that she had already been live the entire time. The red creeping over her face now had nothing to do with the lights in her hair.

~ "Ahaha alright," ~ She chuckled, sucking in air through her teeth. *All I've got to do is say exactly what I planned on the way over. Wait, shit, what was it? No, the goddamn silence stole it again!* Sometimes, when Ryuko had nothing to distract herself and The Silence got particularly strong, it seemed to swallow up everything she'd been trying to think. Compounded with the nerves, of course it would happen now. So now she had to improvise and try to piece it together, in front of all these cameras staring at her like empty, lidless eyes.

~ "So, uh, I'm Ryuko. Ryuko Matoi. You know the one. I'm just – I mean I just – I'm here to set the record straight about a few things that came to my attention lately. Cuz I've seen about all you who're trying ta build a who new religion based on me, going around startin' wars and killing people because they won't worship me, and if I can get you to stop, I'm gonna." ~ She cleared her throat, then carried on, maybe a little too quickly, ~ "So let's start with the easy one here. Yo! Newsie, uh, you're name was Kenji, right?" ~

~ "Whu, me? Well, yes?" ~

~ "Kenji tell me, do I look like a Goddess to you?" ~

~ "Well, I don't know, I -, " ~

~ "- You're sitting right next to me here. I just got out of bed like half an hour ago. You really gonna tell me that this is what you expect a *Goddess* to look like?" ~

~ "Well no." ~

~ "Exactly," ~ Ryuko said, recovering a bit of her confidence as the words started to piece themselves together, ~ "You see I'm not a goddess, or Jesus, or anything. And before you do the 'only the real deal would deny her own divinity' one, I'm aware of that. That's not what's going on here. Yeah, I've got freaky powers, but if you live in Japan you already knew what Goku Uniforms were and so I feel like it's kind of weird if you don't see how it's

basically the same thing. But just so we're clear: I'm not from heaven or anywhere, I was born right here in Japan. I don't have any wisdom for you, and I don't know what happens when you die. Hell, I wish I did." ~

~ "And look, if that's not enough, then I'll just straight up tell you," ~ Ryuko added, on a roll now. ~ "People think I showed up out of nowhere when the Life-Fiber crisis kicked off, but truth is before that I was just another punk kid going to boarding school. My powers didn't show up until I put on Kamui Senketsu, but where they came from – ah shit should I say it?" ~ *I might as well, they deserve to know, and I should be over it by now.* But still, she hesitated. Satsuki thought she could see the steam coming out of Ryuko's ears. ~ "Yeah, fu – er – it's fine, it's too late. People have been wondering where I came from, and I'll tell you right now. I'm sure someone's gonna get mad because this is a red-tape thing, but it's fine. Okay \*ahem\*: I was made in a lab. They took a normal human baby and combined it with life fibers. That's it. I was made as a weapon to be used against Ragyo to stop her from destroying the world. And now that I'm done with that I'm just out her tryin' to make something of myself, just like everybody else." ~

Although none of the audience in Ryuko's penthouse had heard all this before, save Satsuki, to most of them it wasn't that big a surprise. They already knew she was superhuman, what was one explanation over another so long as it made sense? But Haruka, well, her mouth was hanging slack, her heart pounding. *She's serious about this. That's it, that's really all there is? Why, why wouldn't she tell me?*

Satsuki, meanwhile, couldn't help but feeling a pang of sympathy for Ryuko. She never, ever talked about this, and more than everyone else Satsuki knew it wasn't easy. *She's probably imagining that she's talking directly to that Alessia woman. I wonder what would happen if they met in person? She'd better not mention her directly, that would be the height of foolishness.*

~ "Hold on, so you're telling me *you're* made out of life fibers?" ~ Kenji asked, shocked. Ryuko looked over at him both surprised that he was talking and terrified at her tone.

~ "Well, I mean, yeah, but it's no big deal. Like, there's lots of science-types who've known that for a while now. It doesn't make me any less human – well no, it does, but – ah hell I don't know the point is you don't have to worry. The life fibers inside me are under my control and that ain't changin'." ~

~ "So, you would call yourself, uh, what would you call yourself?" ~

~ "Life-fiber hybrid. Or just hybrid." ~

~ "So, you do not condone Matoists and others that hold you as a religious figure." ~

~ "Yeah," ~ Ryuko suddenly remembered why she was there, ~ "Look, it's pretty simple. Stop worshipping me. Stop fighting for me. I – I mean that you should see there's no reason to. I'm just another person, I'm not even that much of a hero. In my place any of you would have done the same thing!" ~ She exclaimed. ~ "And if you still don't believe that, you still think I'm a goddess then stop anyway. Consider it an order. All I want is that you don't kill anybody else thinking you're doing it for me. It's like, the worst, really" ~

~ “I – I see,” ~ Kenji started when Ryuko paused and shifted nervously, looking like she was about to stand up. ~ “Well thankyou for coming out here, Lady Ryuko, I think -,” ~

~ “And-and one last thing. If you don’t think I’m a goddess, if you’re one of the ones fighting the people who do, please just... you stop too. I’m serious. I didn’t save you just to watch you all tear each other apart.” ~ And with that Ryuko did stand up, striding out of frame without a goodbye. Her friends started clapping. Haruka looked utterly lost. Satsuki was too busy trying to estimate what the reaction would be from the world, once the footage began to spread.

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“You going out?” Haruka called over from the bed, watching as Ryuko changed into the thin athletic clothes she wore for her evening patrol of the city.

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh, I kinda thought today you might not.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, because of the whole TV thing,”

“That took like, an hour. Not exactly a busy day.”

“Okay. So you uh, you don’t want to talk about it, huh?”

“Well, not right now, really,” Ryuko sighed, shoving up her hair like she usually did. It always took Haruka’s breath away.

“I thought it was amazing, you know.”

“Heh, alright.”

“What does that mean?”

“It was stupid, Satsuki was right. I didn’t even remember half of what I wanted to say.”

“No! It definitely wasn’t. Wait, she said that?”

Ryuko chuckled, “When I got to the part where I had to actually tell everyone to stop fighting and I just realized how ridiculous it was.”

“I thought that was the best part. I mean, because the first part...”

“- Haruka it’s a *war*. You can’t just stop that because someone asked. Makes me look like a naïve wuss. Like I don’t know how the world works. I should have remembered, I’ve been there before.”

“They’ll listen to you. It’s you, after all. All you had to do was ask, you didn’t need to do the first part.”

“That was the most important part.”

“But why? I’m sure there was an easier way to get people to stop believing in you if, y’know, that’s what you want.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you had to deceive them to -,” Haruka read the look on Ryuko’s face. It didn’t inspire confidence, “Wait, you weren’t serious, were you?”

“Yeah, yeah I was fuckin’ serious,” A pinprick of rage was worming its way into Ryuko’s head. Compared to how her other friends had reacted – cheering about how cool it was, not really interest in the content - compared to how Satsuki had reacted... That had made Ryuko grin despite herself. She’d shrugged, feeling a little sheepish now that she’d decided Satsuki had been right, and Satsuki had shrugged back with a smug little smile. All she said was, “*And now we wait.*” Compared to that, this was torture.

“Wha – but I thought – with the lab and -,” Haruka stumbled, trying to stumble through this shattering revelation.

“Haruka, take a step back for me real quick, and tell me what you think is happening here.”

“You - No, I don’t believe it - that’s really all there is?”

“Yeah that’s it. I’m just a regular human that got blended up with life-fibers. You’re telling me you really thought all this time you were dating – fucking – like, a goddess or, or something? Well, what?”

“I – I don’t know! Like an - an angel or something.”

“Well I’m *flattered*,” Ryuko said venomously, deciding that enough was enough, this was months overdue, “But you’re telling me you thought you were here dating an *angel* for *half a year* even though I told you that wasn’t true? Do you realize how insane that sounds? Just, completely insane!”

“You never told me anything like that! What was I supposed to think! You *fell from space*, in case you forgot!” Being called insane was Haruka’s breaking point. Even minutes ago, she couldn’t have imagined yelling at Ryuko, but somehow this was where they were now. She didn’t know what was happening and that only made it worse. “And – and you were the one who asked me out!”

“But you stuck around, and never once did you ask about it. How do you just not say anything at all about it? You – you aren’t one of them,” Ryuko nodded dismissively out the window to the street below, where campfires were already burning, “Right?”

“No! I just thought, like, one day you would -,”

“Grace you with my secret divine wisdom?”

“Well like – not like that! Just, one day you would tell me. Why do you never tell me anything!”

“What I just don’t understand how you’ve gone this long still thinking I have some kind of secret!”

“But there was a secret! It just... wasn’t what I expected.”

“Yeah, well I hope you’re satisfied with that.”

“No, not really.”

“Well, nothing I can do about that. It’s just like I said, they did some science stuff on me and usually it would’ve killed me but for some reason it didn’t. That’s it.”

“For some reason.”

“What?”

“That’s what you said. Maybe there *is* something there, you ever think of that?”

“Oh my god would you let it go already?” Ryuko sighed, “Look, this is getting too weird, okay? I thought you were just a quiet, agreeable sort of girl, but now you’re telling me you’ve been sucking up to me because you think I’m some sort of... being.” In truth Ryuko had suspected this for a while, and had frequently regretted not saying anything about it sooner. But Haruka was the weirdo here, not her. “What am I supposed to think?”

“Ryuko I,” Haruka said more softly, feeling now that in Ryuko’s eyes she had fucked up massively “I didn’t do anything because of that, really. I – I love you, I do.”

“I know,” Ryuko also calmed down a little bit. But she wouldn’t let Haruka’s evident devastation melt her resolve, “I lo – I think, I think I need time to think about this. I don’t want... I don’t think it’s any good if you love me for the wrong reason.”

“But I don’t. I love *you* – forget all that angel stuff.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry but I can’t. Could you, could you leave me alone, for a minute? Could you just go?”

“Could I... go?”

“Yeah like, I don’t know. Maybe come back when you figure all this shit out.”

Haruka stood up, even though she felt like she would crumble along with her world. Maybe Ryuko meant it, maybe she just needed a night to brood and everything would be back to normal. But no. “So, this is it, huh?” She asked.

“Maybe. For now, anyway. I’m sorry, I -,”

“No it’s – it’s okay,” She desperately held up a weak smile, “I think I always knew you would move past me one day. I didn’t think it would be over this, though.”

“What else is there?”

“You’re wrong though. You are special. You should end up with someone special.”

“Stop saying shit like that. Why aren’t you angry, I’m breaking up with you. Get angry!”

“It’s Satsuki, isn’t it?” Haruka sniffled, the pieces finally clicking for her, “I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. It’s okay, really. She’s like you, she’s someone special.”

“Just...” Ryuko sighed, placing an aggrieved hand across her brow. “No. Just go.”

And just like that, she did go. She vanished out the door, shutting it behind her nearly silently. Leaving Ryuko alone. With The Silence. She almost caved and called Haruka back just so the static in her head would go away.

Haruka made it halfway down the stairs before breaking down. She thought she heard footsteps, and half hoped it would be Satsuki. She’d have it out with her now, the worst thing she could do was kill her. But it was just a chair pushed over by the wind clattering on the patio.

Ryuko didn’t patrol that night. Until three in the morning a cacophony of electronic music flooded out from the crack in her doorway as she stared up at the ceiling. It had to be done, it should have been done a long time ago. Why didn’t she feel relieved? Why didn’t she feel guilty either? The Silence wouldn’t give her the space to figure it out.

She was on her tenth replay of a *Regalia* instrumental, watching with her superhuman vision as the sky gradually lightened to the east, when she somehow found herself texting Nonon. And she, for some reason, responded. They traded snide jabs for almost half an hour.

Y’know what’s nice about you? I at least know that you don’t think I’m anything special.

What the FUCK could prompt you to send that

... you still there?

That was the last exchange between Ryuko and Nonon that night. Uzu woke up and demanded that Nonon shut that damn phone off and stop shining it in his eyes. So she had to spend another half an hour squabbling halfheartedly with him until they both got too tired. By that point Ryuko too had collapsed from exhaustion.

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Three weeks later, Alessia Di Donato was crowned First Heirarch of the Matoiist Church. Her followers continued to battle nonbelievers in the barren Italian hills for weeks after that. Satsuki held off on telling Ryuko this. She'd just gone through a breakup after all

## Chapter End Notes

Reaaaaally hoping the second bit of this part is good. Seems a bit rushed to me but what do I know

Legit question for those who've made it this far (thank you btw!): What would you like to see out of this fic? Not that I'm running out of ideas (I have the next ten chapters outlined in detail as well as the overarching story), but since my plan is to continue posting these at a rate of about 1 chapter a week I'd better make sure it's entertaining someone besides me, right? So if there's something particular you'd prefer, more side characters, forging ahead with the main plot or main romance, more fun fluff, more serious melodrama, let me know and I'll try to work it in. I will make this show that's rotted my brain relevant again by myself if I have to, but I'd appreciate being able to give people what they want to read in the process.

We're getting to the violence soon I promise.

# In which Ryuko meets Rei again, for the first time

## Chapter Notes

Ooh man I hope y'all think this one's good. Seems kinda abrupt to me but I've seen sparks fly for less.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

December 2065

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It started at the Kiryuin Foundation holiday party. Ryuko hadn't wanted to go at first, thinking it would be a real drag, a bunch of wealthy socialites hobnobbing the way only they knew how. She remembered Nonon's party from last year and decided, since she would just end up ignoring them, it wasn't worth dealing with again. But when she mentioned it to Satsuki, she'd been assured that wasn't it at all – this was for the employees, not research or political connections or any of Satsuki's work. An actual party. So she ended up pulling up in the limo with her, breezing past reporter's flashing cameras, attempting to replicate Satsuki's unruffled grace. Satsuki had been so insistent, if Ryuko hadn't gone she would have just felt bad.

A couple hours in, Ryuko was happy to admit she'd been wrong. The main atrium of the Research Complex's Visitor Center, that vast hallway that Ryuko always thought looked awfully empty, was finally bustling. Bright gold, green, and red lights glistened off the statue of Kinue Kinagase and twinkled through the fountains, casting the gathered crowds into a warm glow. Despite there being several hundred guests in attendance the atmosphere was far from wild – you could easily hold a conversation anywhere but directly next to the dance floor. Most people seemed to be taking Satsuki's advice from her opening remarks and enjoying the food and drink and relaxing after a year of hard work. It was the most restful party Ryuko had ever attended and she couldn't say she didn't appreciate it. Especially considering how many nights she'd spent in the deafening confines of nightclubs and bars lately.

And the whole gang was there too. Mako and Ira came in on the train from Kansai, Mataro meandered in (nobody was sure how he'd even got there), the scientists wandered out of their hole – they probably hadn't even started to get ready until fifteen minutes before the guests arrived, knowing them – and then there was Nonon and Uzu. This was their first *event* as a couple and apparently that meant something to Nonon because she was a bundle of nervous energy. Nagging Uzu about keeping his tie straight when she thought nobody was looking, hanging on his arm when someone was, Ryuko opened her mouth to call her out on it as soon as they'd grabbed a table, but Uzu shot her a look that said “let her do her thing” then carried on laughing off Nonon's antics. The only one missing was Satsuki, even though

you couldn't miss her holding court at Kinue's feet. She had many people she felt the need to talk to though, so she couldn't join in on everyone's fun.

Ryuko's night took a dramatic turn when, as she waded through the dense crowd around the bar with drinks for the table, a shoulder slammed into her side with such force that Nonon's cocktail nearly flew from her hand. Nearly, but it was enough to provoke some preemptive mortification as Ryuko imagined all that fizzy, pink crushed ice spraying on a hapless bystander.

"Hey! Watch it!"

"Excuse me, why don't you watch where *you're* going!" Ryuko wheeled around quickly – that voice was not at all what she was expecting. And as she got a look at her assailant, she realized that this cute little black woman with her gigantic bun that made her face look even more delicate and her slender shoulders peeking out of a short orange dress was someone she didn't want to get snappy with. Especially considering how her eyes shifted from fiery to surprised and curious as she got a good look at Ryuko. Made her think she actually might be interested.

Rei, meanwhile, was coming to a similar realization. Unlike Ryuko she knew exactly who she'd bumped into – even without the sparkling lights in her hair or the gear shaped pupils – there was no mistaking her. But she did feel just as bad as Ryuko about her hostility. Stories Satsuki had told her about Ryuko popped up in her mind. And things Satsuki hadn't told her too. Like how devastating that toothy, sheepish grin was. *And she's on the market*, Rei remembered Satsuki mentioning her breakup a month or so ago. *But no. She would never and I shouldn't. And besides, she's in college now, must have girls all over her.*

"Oh, sorry I -,"

"Oh, sorry I -," They both began in unison, then stopped, then both opened their mouths again. Ryuko had to giggle at it, and Rei joined in without much hesitation. For a woman with such a low, scratchy voice she had a surprisingly sweet laugh.

"You go first," Rei said with a magnanimous hand wave.

"Alright. I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean ta be all... y'know."

"No, it's fine, really," Rei smiled. "It's important, I get it," She gestured towards the drinks in Ryuko's hands.

"Heh, you know it's funny, these aren't even mine. I'm more of a liquor gal. I'm just bringin' em for -,"

"Wait, no let me guess. The pina colada type thing is for Jakuzure, the beer for either Gamagoori or Sanageyama, and the water..."

"- That's Mako," Ryuko filled her in when she looked stumped, "Shit, how'd you know that?"

“Oh I...,” Rei began, but she hesitated, suddenly concerned with how Ryuko might react to learning her identity, “... I work as a consultant. I’ve met a few of them.”

“No, I mean, how’d you know about – wait, you know who I am?”

Are you so surprised? Rei communicated with a raised eyebrow, “It’s nice to meet you in person, Ryuko. You’re much more... intimidating behind a camera, you know that?”

“Ahaha shit you saw that?” Ryuko lifted an awkward hand behind her head. She’d been deflecting questions about her recent TV appearance all night, but Rei mentioning it with that little lilt left her at a loss. “Y’know people tell me I’m intimidating in real life too sometimes. But you don’t seem like the type to be intimidated.”

“Oh no, in fact I was going to say you seem *very* approachable to me.”

“Sweet,” Ryuko smiled. *No, it’s not my imagination! She’s definitely into me.* “So you know Nonon, huh? Then I’m sure you know how much of a pain in the ass she is,” Ryuko started, latching on to something to keep the conversation going.

“Oh, and she’d say the same about you.”

“Oh yeah, we’re *best* friends,” Ryuko rolled her eyes, but her tone was only half sarcastic and she ended it with a conspiratorial smile that told Rei everything she needed to know. Not like she didn’t already know – she’d been down in the lab, heard Nonon whine with a smile on her face about how she still wasn’t a better fighter than Ryuko even at human levels. She giggled.

“Well, what do you expect when such big personalities meet? It’s a wonder to me you all can be in the same room.”

“Nah, nah, I can’t stay mad at them. We’re way past that. Even if they’re all weirdos I mean, let’s face it so am I, y’know?”

“That’s sweet. One big happy family, eh?”

“We try. Can’t say it’s not nice though, especially since I was an only child.”

“Really? Me too! Well, sort of.”

“Tch,” Ryuko clicked her teeth, “It’s a tough life, isn’t it?”

“Mmm,” Rei nodded. She figured at that point they were done here. She’d meet Ryuko again at some point and Ryuko would think *“oh yeah, we met once,”* and hopefully not think too hard about how she’d said some vaguely flirtatious things. *It’s nice to find out she’s as friendly as Satsuki described her, and just as gorgeous as she looked from far away to boot. Not like that’s not expected for a Kiryuin.* But Ryuko had other ideas.

“Hey, listen. I’d *really* like to continue this conversation, but I do have to get back to my ‘big happy family’ with their shit,” She jiggled their drinks around, and Rei gave a start.

“You – ah – sure, yeah. I’d like that too.”

“Really? Cool.” Ryuko grinned, “Okay, stay right here. Or no wait, come with me, it’ll just take a sec. You can say hi to Nonon, I’m sure she’ll love that.”

“Huh? Oh no, that’s alright, I’ll stay here,” From that heart-stopping grin Rei was sure Ryuko would come back, and that she was looking forward to it on a level she knew wasn’t logical.

“Nah, it’s fine, really. If you think I’m approachable, you’ll have no problem with them.”

“Oh...” *No sense ducking from it, one way or another Ryuko will figure out who I am eventually,* “... alright.”

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“Ryuko’s back!” Mako shouted, throwing her arms around her bestie as she returned to the table. Standing off to the side, Rei had to smile at it as Ryuko responded in kind. “Have a nacho!” Mako kept shouting, shoving the plate in the center of the table at her.

“No thanks, Mako,” Ryuko chuckled, “I ain’t hungry.” Which was categorically true; the last time Ryuko had eaten at all was a week ago and thanks to her hybrid body she was none the worse for the wear. She’d gone to get lunch with Satsuki for the purpose of getting her out of the house since she’d been ducking from the paparazzi since her TV appearance. But Mako made a pouty noise and shook her arm, and she caved. “Ah what the hell, I’ll have one.”

“My hero!” Uzu reached over to snag his beer with a friendly slap to Ryuko’s shoulder, “This looks like good stuff.”

“Well, better than the rest. Hope you like it. Oh, and uh, here,” Ryuko slid Nonon’s cocktail over to her, purposefully leaving it for an afterthought. “Alright, I’m actually gonna get going now,” She said with a nod, then turned to Rei “Alright, you ready to go? Or uh, did you want to say hi?”

“-Urk!” A sudden pained noise from Nonon caught Ryuko’s attention, and she whirled around. Everyone else was suddenly looking at her bug-eyed too (except Mako who hadn’t seen Rei with her new hair color and as such didn’t recognize her). But she only noticed Nonon’s reaction.

“Well, what Nonon. I told you I had pull, didn’t I?”

“Ryuko, what the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” Nonon hissed. Rei took a worried step back. *Oh boy, here it comes.*

“Okay, you know what? I’m not dealing with you now. C’mon, let’s go.” Rei allowed Ryuko to lead her off with a sigh of relief, leaving the rest of the gang staring after



them in confusion.

“So... was that who I thought it was?” Uzu exclaimed.

“Yeah, duh,” Nonon replied. Mako scrunched up her face in confusion.

“Now hold on, who was she? She’s super cute,” she asked.

“Rei Hououmaru,” Gamagoori explained, “She used to be Ragyo’s secretary.”

“You know, she kidnapped you that one time?” Nonon said, tapping Mako on the skull with her knuckles. “Think for a second, C-student!”

“Ohhhh!” Mako remembered now, “Wow so she’s not evil now, huh? They make an adorable couple!”

“Ugh,” Nonon groaned. “The real question is, which of them is playing the other?”

“Not even gonna give them the benefit of the doubt, huh?” Aikuro chuckled. “This might’ve happened naturally, you don’t know.”

“With Ryuko? Heh, I kinda doubt it.”

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Satsuki saw all this, she’d been keeping an eye on Ryuko for the entire party, and she felt a horrid sinking as she watched Ryuko and Rei take a seat by one of the fountains and spend nearly an hour just talking, laughing, inching closer and closer to each other. She should have known – Rei was just Ryuko’s type. From Mako to Haruka to all the one-night-stands she’d had since breaking up with Haruka (and there were a lot of those) Ryuko always went for petite girls with cute little faces and big round eyes. The type of girl she could pick up and toss around without any trouble at all. Rei certainly fit that bill. And they had something like history together, messed up as it was.

Satsuki had been paying a carefully concealed amount of keen attention to Ryuko’s recent rendezvous whenever she happened to be staying over in Tokyo. Each time a girl hadn’t come back for a second night her heart had soared, which wound up being almost every time. She couldn’t understand it, she had no idea about The Silence, how Ryuko needed someone, anyone, any living thing sleeping near her to distract her from the hole in her mind. But she did admire it in an odd way. Was this what she had learned from synchronizing with Senketsu, not only not to take shame in her own body but to celebrate it, celebrate the bodies of all the women she’d saved? It might be a nice lesson to learn, but Satsuki couldn’t imagine how to even begin.

And there was something fitting to it to. What better way to show the times had changed than to make a lover out of a former mortal enemy? And yet...

Well, it had to do with it being *Rei* in particular. She wasn’t entirely better yet, the “massage incident” had proven that. Satsuki knew all too well how deep the scars from a life like hers ran. Best case scenario, they woke up the next morning to an awkward realization

and did their best to forget about tonight from then on. But worse case... if Rei developed some sort of dependency, or, god forbid, real feelings, and Ryuko wasn't interested anymore who knew what she would do? Ryuko didn't know anything about that, she might break the poor girl's heart as easily as stepping on an anthill. Or – and this was maybe even worse – what if they *both* felt something, and this wasn't over after tonight. If this was the one that lasted, Satsuki already knew it would make her life miserable. And there was nothing she could say, she was the deviant here. The guilt burned her. But no, no she had to do something. Just in case this whole thing turned out to be a disaster.

She spent a while thinking about what she would say, and she got her chance when Rei excused herself for a moment. Ryuko grinned and waved exuberantly as Satsuki approached – she'd barely touched any alcohol the entire night, rather she was intoxicated entirely on Rei's presence.

“Sats! Hey! How's it goin'?” You know, I gotta thank you for draggin' me here, it's been pretty great so far!” That was the knife in Satsuki's gut. *And I've got nobody to blame for this but myself. If I hadn't been so insistent on bringing her here, or told Rei so many stories about her, none of this would have happened.* Satsuki cleared her throat and open her mouth.

“You shouldn't be doing this,” She declared, being mindful that her time was limited. Ryuko's face fell.

“What? Sats what the hell's the problem?”

“Do you know who that is?”

“Aha, well...” Ryuko's face shifted quickly from aggressive to sheepish as she was struck by the realization that no, she hadn't gotten her new companion's name. *Ah shit, she's important. And now I'm knee deep in ruining diplomatic relations with some African country I bet.*

“That's Rei. Rei Hououmaru.”

“Oh shit, really?” Now this was far, far from what Ryuko had expected. But suddenly it clicked: the slight evasions about her upbringing, the vague familiarity of her face, Nonon's reaction. “She changed her hair. Wait, what the hell! Why didn't you tell me she was back?”

“Why should I have, she's a business associate of mine. Do I tell you every time I hire someone new at the office?”

“Ahh c'mon Sats,” Ryuko groaned, palm to her forehead, “And here I was worryin' that she was gonna try and pull some shit and kill you and now -,” *But she likes you. She likes you and you've never been with an actual grown up woman with her shit together before.* Ryuko fought down the thought that, if she had her way, she'd still choose Satsuki even at her bitchiest. That thought was pure fantasy, and Rei was more than beautiful enough to make up for it. “No but seriously, she's like a whole new person now.”

“That may be so, but you never had a single conversation with her, and you know it.”

“Whatever. What’s your point?”

“What is my – Ryuko you know as well as I do why she had to spend an entire year in intensive therapy. What kind of people she’s lived with. You really think she’s not still a little vulnerable?”

“Wha – I – Jesus Sats I’m not gonna take advantage of her! I mean think what you want – I see you scowling whenever I bring home a date – but I do have standards. And we were having a great time until you came along!”

“So you... so you don’t care about her identity, then?” Satsuki asked, at a complete loss.

“No, y’know what, I do. Cuz I’d imagined her as a real hardcore bitch but now I find she’s actually being less bitchy than you,” Another knife.

“Ryuko...,” Satsuki muttered, still fuming but holding it back now, knowing that Ryuko was right.

“Maybe you should get going before she gets back. Look, I don’t get what your problem is, I mean, you work with her don’t you?”

“But Ryuko, I -,”

“- Look, here she comes now. C’mon now Sats, don’t look like that,” Ryuko said more sympathetically, “We’ll talk about it some time soon, okay? But I’m here to tell you that if you think there’s something wrong with her, I don’t buy it.”

It’s still fine. Satsuki thought as she stalked away, wondering if she should have known that Ryuko would respond that way. *They’ll wake up tomorrow and regret it, I’m sure.* She kept this certainty as the party dragged on, wound down, swept her out the door with the departing crowds and eventually dropped her in her bed in the penthouse. Sleep didn’t come easily – she listened intently for the telltale sound of Ryuko’s shoes landing on the patio. And when it arrived, it was followed by giggling. Giggling and low chatter that didn’t stop until they were upstairs and out of earshot. But that was fine too.

Every was fine until the next morning when, as she sat at her desk checking the emails she’d missed last night, she heard through her door the words that were the sharpest knife of all, right in her heart.

“So, I’ll uh, I’ll call you or something.”

“Or something.”

“Heh, yeah, you never know.”

“Well, make your move Ryuko, but remember – I know where you live.”

“Oho, don’t make a threat you can’t carry out now Rei.”

“You thought that was a threat? You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Then there came a noise of fabric on fabric, a faint gasp. *What is going on out there? Why aren’t any of Ryuko’s friends stopping this?*

“Ohh, you really are incorrigible, aren’t you?”

“Big words for such a little girl.”

“You don’t know what it means, do you?”

“...No...” Another pause, another noise that sank in Satsuki’s stomach.

“Actually, want to go back upstairs?”

“Yeah, sure, why not?”

Satsuki sat staring at her laptop, head rested on her hand, for longer than she cared to admit. She had never felt so despondent in all her life. But there was work to be done, and she was gone long, long before Rei.

Rei called in sick that day.

Chapter End Notes

I like Rei. I like Ryuko and Rei together. To my knowledge this has never been done before. I'm sure you're all clamoring for me to just get to the Satsuryu already but bear with me here. If it's in the tags, it'll happen eventually.

Rei doesn't get a lot of love because she is such a minor character. I can't blame people for not knowing what to do with her. But I think she's got a lot of potential for development and rounds out the post canon cast in a pretty reasonable way.

Stay tuned for more of what these two are like as a couple (among other things). I wanted to include that here but this chapter was long enough already.

In which Nonon bridges the gap

Chapter Notes

This one took a little longer than I meant because, well, it kind of had to be good. I think it's good. Please tell me what you think, though.

December 2065

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*Today's the day.*

Nonon's eyes shot open as this simple thought passed through her head. She stared up at the distant beige expanse of the ceiling, feeling her heart pounding in her chest until she was sure it would burst. It reminded her of nothing more than how she felt as a child each Christmas morning, except tinged with a panic that sucked the blood from her skin. Today was the day, alright. In a few hours she would either become the second human ever to wear a Kamui – or die.

*A few hours... what time is it anyway... four-thirty!* Nonon groaned - it was going to be more than a few hours. She threw her phone down with a stiff hand and, eventually, willed herself to roll over and try to nestle back to sleep. It didn't do the trick though and Nonon was left, cheek pressed up against the sleek surface of Uzu's bare shoulder, feeling twitchy and restless and deeply jealous. Look at how peaceful he was, limbs thrown all about carelessly, making those oddly adorable little muttering noises. It wasn't fair, but then it wouldn't be fair to wake him either. No, she'd leave him be for the moment, but he'd better appreciate that she hadn't forced him to wake up and join her in this hell.

With anything better to do she rolled off the bed and padded quietly over to the mirror, rolling up her sleeves and shirt as though the products of a year of brutal training would vanish overnight. Of course, they hadn't; her muscles were still as built as they could naturally be for a woman of her short stature. She'd be considered dangerously thin if she didn't have a world-renowned biologist to lay out her nutrition (well Xenobiologist, technically, but close enough). And in cardio and gymnastics, where she always stood out, she was performing better than ever. Especially breath control, although to be fair that was to be expected considering she'd played more than her share of brass instruments. She ran through all these facts as if there was something left to forget, reassuring herself that she was as ready as she'd ever be. But then, Satsuki had reached a peak of fitness Nonon could never hope to achieve, her body honed to the theoretical maximum, and she'd barely survived. No way around it, if the Kamui decided it wanted her dead, she was dead.

She walked two laps around Uzu's apartment to clear her head, then settled back into bed. But sleep still wouldn't come; every inch of the sheets seemed rough and wrinkled and her stupid eyes were just unwilling to stay shut. So she grabbed her phone again and started scrolling. But who to text? Houka was the obvious choice, he would definitely respond, but Shiro had decided to intervene for the sake of his health and made her promise not text him after midnight. Satsuki? No, she was asleep, and besides you didn't just *text* Satsuki for no reason. Ryuko was right out, of course. And Mako would probably respond, she slept with her ringer on full volume (she was so excited about owning a phone since she hadn't been able to afford one before), but that level of unquestioning optimism wasn't something she could deal with at the moment. No, the only person she actually wanted to talk to was the one she had just decided not to wake up.

But then, Uzu stirred and her heart leapt. *Oh, he woke up on his own!*

"Uzu!" She whispered urgently. His eyes slid open just a hair, grey irises blank and uncomprehending.

"Go back to sleep," He murmured.

"Can't."

"Put... put the phone down then. Too bright."

"You could wear a sleep mask, you know."

"You could not text in bed."

"Okay no, no wait," Nonon set her phone down and leaned over him. *We're not having this argument again, today of all days.* He lazily raised a hand to her side, but it didn't make it all the way and settled for her wrist. "Do you know what today is?"

"Nooo..." He trailed off, thinking, "Wait, today's the day? Shit, that really snuck up me, huh?"

"It's okay. It snuck up on me too."

"Well. Uh." He was suddenly wide awake, although his brain didn't seem to have caught up yet. "You nervous?" He read the look in her eyes and smiled, "You shouldn't be."

"Let's not talk about that," Nonon said quickly, overcome but the sudden urge to be closer. He couldn't make her nerves go away with his words, but maybe she could forget, if only for just a moment. The surprised but not at all unwelcoming "oh?" when she straddled his waist helped, and so did the softness of his lips on hers as she silenced him. She held him there as long as he could manage, back arched into his bare chest, teeth knocking together occasionally – which she usually hated – until the long, satisfied sigh escaping his nose and the hands creeping up her sides told her he was ready. That, and the strangled noise in the back of his throat that was probably him running out of air.

"Heh, I didn't think you'd-,"

“-Shh,” Nonon chided as she quickly slipped both his boxers and her own pajama shorts off – *times like these it pays to have quick fingers and good flexibility* – and then gracefully re-mounted him, letting out a squeaking gasp that was more involuntary than she cared to admit. Uzu looked up at her with a mixture between a giddy grin and a stunned groan. *God, I really am dating a monkey, if this is all it takes to impress him*, Nonon thought with a giggle.

In retrospect, she shouldn't have been surprised the first round didn't last very long. Even before she began riding him, she'd already been instinctively moving her hips in a very stimulating rhythm. And then she'd done that thing when they locked eyes – pulled that smug little smile with the raised eyebrow that seemed to say, *“is that the best you've got?”*. That had, as always, driven him wild and lead him to finally yank her shirt off and squeeze her stomach so hard she thought he might actually manage to wrap his fingers all the way around her. Maybe she shouldn't have done that, maybe it pushed him too far before she was ready. Or maybe it was that nagging thought that this could be the last time – ever – that kept her from fully enjoying it. Either way she was disappointed when, suddenly, uncomfortably, he stopped thrusting.

“Hold on, you'd better -,”

“Ah, alright, alright,” It was a remarkably conscientious move on his part and Nonon had to respect it. She, reluctantly, removed herself and finished him off with her hand, pulling his boxers back up make the results his problem. He didn't seem to mind though, and when he finally caught his breath he chuckled and twiddled a strand of her hair between his fingers.

“Now, where did that come from?” He asked as Nonon snuggled up next to him.

“I dunno,” Nonon hummed, barely opening her mouth, “Just... in case.”

“Now hold on,” Uzu frowned and sat up a little straighter, “Don't talk like that. You're gonna be fine.”

“You don't know that.”

“I do so. These things always work out in the end.”

“Real vote of confidence there, huh?”

“Well, I...”

“You don't have to reassure me, okay? I know it's a risk, I'm alright with that,” She lied, trying to convince herself, “It's the uncertainty that gets me.”

“If you say so. And you're right, whatever happens, happens,” Nonon only had to look at his face, or feel the way his arm around her shoulders held her closer than ever, to see that no matter what she claimed, he wasn't alright with that. “Oh wait, you didn't... uh...” He said after a pause

“Get off? Geez come on, you can say it,” Nonon groaned.

“Well, you didn’t, did you? Here, I’ll pay you back,”

“No, no I’m good. I mean, you’re going to. But let’s just lay here a little longer, alright? We’ve got time to kill.”.

They laid there in silence for an amount of time Nonon had difficulty keeping track of. But it did what even the sex couldn’t and made her forget to worry about what was in store for her, if only for a little while. No surprise there, this was what they did best back during the war. Uzu let out a soft, appreciative chuckle.

“What’s up?”

“I was just thinking about when Satsuki first recruited me. First thing when I met you, I thought you were the brattiest, most stuck-up little cunt on Earth. But you probably knew that.”

“I did. And I thought *you* were the stupidest meathead jock -,”

“- I knew that too –,”

“– I mean, being *that* obsessed with fighting – I thought you’d had one too many concussions. Almost felt bad for you. Almost.”

“And now look at us.”

“You’re still a dumb jock.”

“And you’re still a little brat.”

“But you know what, I’ve warmed up to fighting thing, that’s for sure. Did you know, this whole time I’ve been training, I’ve had in my mind this one stupid goal. Like, REVOCS and all that, that’s just a distraction. But beating Ryuko, in a fair fight when she’s at her full power? I said to myself ‘that’s when I’ll know I’ve made it.’. It’s dumb, really, but who else am I supposed to compare to?”

“Are you kidding? That’s fucking awesome.”

“Heh, I should have known you’d like it,” Nonon said snidely.

“What’s not to like? Hell, back in the day that’s what I wanted too. Well, defeating her and Satsuki too. If I had the chance, you know I’d be in line right behind you.”

“... Yeah, I’m sure you would...”

“Speaking of, you know I warmed up on your whole unhealthy obsession with Satsuki thing too.”

“Yeah... maybe a little too warm though.”



“I’m still sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I wanted to be her, you wanted to fuck her. Not too different, really”

“We were stupid back then.”

“We’re stupid now.”

“Yeah...” Uzu trailed off, then smiled sheepishly at Nonon in a way she had come to recognize, “You aren’t gonna like this one.”

“Oh boy.”

“But with you wearing Saiban, it’s like we’re both getting what we wished for back then.”

“Heh, you think I’m gonna be the new Satsuki? If I live through today, I’m not gonna replace her,” Nonon fixed her face into a grim smile, tried to lower her shrill, scratchy voice to an appropriately dramatic pitch, “I’m gonna be better than her.” Uzu’s jaw hung slack, as though he’d been waiting to hear just those words, “Maybe not as a ruler, I guess, but as a Kamui wearer? I’ll find a way.”

“Now that,” The look in Uzu’s eyes was one Nonon had never seen before. Or at least, never seen directed at her before. Reverence. “That doesn’t sound like someone who plans on dying today.”

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Somehow, the unbearable waiting had continued even after Nonon arrived at the lab. She got to watch the scientists setting everything up, everybody trickling in, Ryuko and Rei making eyes at each other, Satsuki pretending she wasn’t annoyed by their unprofessionalism (it was nice to see she actually disapproved of something Ryuko did, for once). She’d long since run out of things to talk about, even with Uzu, and relegated herself to sitting on the couch, begging the universe to just get it over with. The universe didn’t answer, but Houka, eventually, did.

“It’s time. You may proceed to the test chamber,” He said, and somehow Nonon found herself walking, down corridor, past the observation chamber where everybody stood with bated breath, down the stairwell to a darkened little corridor with a solid double door at the end. Just her and Houka now. He adjusted his glasses, a thin, excited smile crossing his face. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’m gonna be.”

“Good,” Houka handed her a short scalpel. “One more time: You cut your finger, put the blood on the Kamui, and within a few seconds you should hear a voice in your head. Then, it should leap up and attach itself to you. If it takes, you’ll know.”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

“Well, that’s everything that happened to Ryuko,” Houka shrugged.

“Inspires confidence,” Nonon said sarcastically. She knew full well Ryuko was *designed* to pair with Senketsu just as much as he was with her. Not exactly fitting comparison.

“Remember also that you should not follow Satsuki’s example and try to subdue it. You have to establish a trust. Just follow the instructions and see what happens. Everything else is on our end. Although, it would be better if you undressed now, so it doesn’t shred your clothing.”

She complied with that instruction, Houka left, there was a beeping noise and the doors swung open, simple as that. She stepped out into the blinding light... and there it was.

She had to resist the urge to run the rest of the distance. There were cameras on, this was a historic moment, and she had to look dignified. But by the time Nonon reached the stark white table her hands were shaking, her heart pounding in her ears. It was really happening. That outfit, that Kamui was hers and hers alone. Whatever happened next, Nonon felt a rush of excitement knowing she’d made it this far.

The finished Kamui Saiban was a beautiful dress, that was beyond all question. It had less black trim than the original – most of the places where that had been were now replaced with a silver that glittered along with the original gold thread. And there was a new pattern embroidered onto the bodice to give it a little extra detail. *Kinda looks like snakeskin. I guess that’s what I get for letting Houka and Shiro help design it.* She ran a finger along it, feeling a silky smoothness nothing like any fabric she’d ever known before, even Goku uniforms. Almost like skin. *This is really a living creature,* it dawned on her.

Up in the observation chamber she could vaguely make out everyone’s faces through the glare on the glass. Everyone who meant anything to her was there: Uzu, Satsuki, Houka and Shiro, Gamagoori, Ryuko, Aikuro and Tsumugu, even Mako (for some reason) and Rei. All watching with an evident mixture of nerves and excitement. None of them would shy away from danger, even if that was because some of them didn’t understand it, and they weren’t looking away now. They had to know what would happen. Even Tsumugu, although he did look much, much more agitated than the rest – arms crossed, foot tapping furiously, deep scowl scarring his expression. But who could blame him? Nonon knew he wanted her to succeed where his sister had failed, but did he think it was possible?

Nearer to her, the floor started whirring and eight robot arms capped by the instantly recognizable cylinders of emergency rescue suction devices emerged from panels in a circle around the table. That made her feel a little better. She took a deep breath to stabilize. *No sense waiting any longer. Alright Saiban, let’s see what you’re made of.*

Blood dribbled out from her forefinger as she, as gingerly as she could, set the scalpel aside. A thin red dotted line that struck Saiban on the breast, right above its eye slit. It vanished without leaving a stain and Nonon’s heart skipped a beat, the corners of her mouth pulling nervously. That seemed like a good sign, but then Kamui hardly came with an instruction manual, and for a moment nothing happened. But then –

[You...]. The voice was just a faint howl on the wind, dry and raspy and barely sounding like a voice at all. But the moment she heard it Nonon stood bolt upright, overcome with joy.

“Huh?” She breathed, the words didn’t come right. *It’s happening It’s happening It’s happening It’s happening!*

~ “Nonon what’s going on down there?” ~ Shiro’s voice over the loudspeaker.

[You...]

“I-I hear it!” She shouted with a giddy little laugh. But then something else hit her. She clutched her chest over her heart as it went wild with overwhelming, desperate dread. *No! No something’s wrong! I need to run, NOW!*

[GIVE ME YOUR BLOOD!]

“Wha - !” Nonon took a step back. *No no no no not now! Not when I was so close!* But it was already too late. The eye slits snapped open. It was already on her.

Everything descended into chaos.

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There had been a plan, of course, but as soon as the Kamui wrapped itself around Nonon like an octopus, squeezing her so tight that you could see her ribs, all of that suddenly seemed very foolish.

“Get her out of there, now!” Aikuro shouted over the blaring alarms, pounding a fist on Houka’s desk as he scrambled away at the computer panel. Houka guided the suction devices in, trying to angle it properly to seize her. But it wasn’t easy, her body shuddered and jerked and bent over backwards, and the robot arms weren’t fast enough to adjust.

“No! She may be able to overpower it on her own!” Shiro shouted back and Houka, torn between them, hesitated and missed an opening.

“That’s no good!” Ryuko shouted, “She needs to sync with it! Sats, let me go in there!”

“No Ryuko, suction devices first! Houka! Remove her!” Satsuki’s face was white, but as usual she was keeping it together about as well as could be expected. Much more so than Tsumugu, who was sobbing, clutching the sides of his head and ripping at his hair, reliving the worst day of his life. Rei had gone over to console him as best she could, realizing she wasn’t helpful for much else at the moment.

“I am trying!” He shouted, and finally managed to get one within a few feet of her as she straightened up, clawing at her throat desperately. But then, as though gripped by an invisible hand, the suction device *crumpled*. And the others further away weren’t far behind. “... No,” Houka breathed, throwing his hands over his eyes in defeat as the robot arms were shredded by waves of raw energy screaming from the Kamui. His best friend, killed by his own invention. He should have seen it coming.

“What!” Uzu had been clenching the back of a chair with white, scared out of his wits but faithful that they’d be able to save her. Now his voice cracked under the strain, and he grabbed the chair and bashed it against the glass desperately “Nonon! Hang on! S- Someone help her!” Gamagoori joined him in trying to break the glass, but they had no luck. Mako’s instincts, on the other hand, were a bit better. She’d vanished before and now returned with a first aid kit and a fire extinguisher. Not that it would do much good, but she stood there at the ready for whatever little help she could provide.

“Satsuki!” Ryuko shouted, and Satsuki looked over at her with a steely gaze and nodded. So it looked like it came down to the final contingency.

Without even a running start, Ryuko kicked her legs into overdrive and blasted through the glass, leaving behind a billowing wall of furnace heat and rushing wind.

~~~~~

Everything was burning. The whole world was shrunk down to pure touch as violent stabs of pain sent lightning through her eyes and a deafening thud of blood in her ears. It was hard to think, impossible to move, and it was all she could do to stay standing.

[It’s not enough! More! More! I can’t go back to sleep! I won’t! I won’t face the dreams again!] Flashes of incoherent memory appeared to Nonon as Saiban howled into her head. An endless black field of swimming stars. Laying chained to an operating table, her innards ripped out, replaced, everything chopped up and spliced until nothing remained pure and unprofaned. Years of frozen, helpless agony. They leaked through with the dread and the all-consuming desperation. And pain too, she wasn’t the only one who was burning.

Like a wounded animal. He’d do anything to escape this pain. Her sympathy was overshadowed by despair as the cold reality settled in. She was dying, and it was much slower and more horrible than she’d expected. Then all that, everything was for nothing after all. She pictured her organs bursting like balloons in her tiny frame, bones crumpling into pulp as that precious, putrid meatbag blood spilled forth. Or was that Saiban picturing that? Or both? It didn’t matter anymore. Maybe it had already happened.

No, no no no no this is all wrong! We were supposed to be friends, partners!

[Friends? After what your kind did to me, meatbag?]

No, I want – Oh god, I- I can’t breathe! That was the final straw; as her hands leapt to her throat, scratching until her skin was red and raw, her conscious thoughts scattered to the wind. Pure survival instinct, impotent as it was, took over and she thrashed and stumbled even more erratically. Still the constant drone of Saiban’s thoughts and feeling leaked their way through. Run, run, run! Kill or be killed! It’s him or me, me or her!

[Why, why won’t you surrender? What’s wrong with you, what do you want?] Now, frustration. The last meatbag had been so sweet, so willing. One little lullaby and she’d been practically begging him to take every last drop. But this one, he just – he couldn’t do it anymore, he couldn’t bend her to his will. *[What did they do to me? What’s wrong with me?]*. This was no good – she would fight on to the bitter end and die without surrendering,

without letting him take her apart. A lump of lifeless flesh was no good to him. And he would go back to sleep, back to the dreams. Such a tiny little volume of blood as he could extract while constricting her wouldn't last long. She couldn't actually survive, could she? Surely, he must have her hemorrhaging by now.

Nonon too, as the world began to darken and feeble strangled sucking noises emerged from her mouth, felt a last vestige of her own frustration. There had to be a way, some sort of puzzle. But she hadn't figured it out. She'd let him break her, and now it was too late. *Why? Why couldn't you see I wanted to help you?*

[You want to help? Then give me your blood!]

It's yours! She finally caved. No sense fighting anymore, not while she was sinking into this fuzzy void, her lungs weeping but every other part of her relaxing, suddenly rid of the pain. *All of it!*

The last thing she felt as her consciousness faded was Saiban's joy, relief, and glee. And a peculiar light feeling as his threads permeated her and started sucking her dry. It was almost worth it, it almost felt like her own joy.

She didn't feel the rough hands grabbing her as she fell, seizing her by the back with a grip both impossibly strong and delicate. What she did feel was what came next: A sensation totally unknown to either her or Saiban. Being ripped in half.

Saiban's shriek of pain echoing through her head was the first time since he'd awoken that he'd sounded truly human.

~~~~~

Hitting the ground shocked Nonon back to life. She sucked air back into her lungs involuntarily, even before her brain rebooted. When it did, nothing around her made any sense. She was... alive? But how? Her hands flew to her stomach –but her skin was wholly intact, no trail of entrails, just a few droplets of blood, not even a scar. She hadn't been ripped in half, so that meant...

Through the blinding light, a shadow loomed over her.

“...Ryuko...”

*[Let me go, you, you, what **are** you?]* Oh good, he wasn't dead. Nonon watched as Saiban reformed in Ryuko's hand, swiftly going from a scrappy rag back to a fully formed dress that lashed and flopped like a fish, baleful orange eyes wild. It didn't do any good though, Ryuko wasn't even paying attention to him, just watching Nonon and breathing a sigh of relief when she stirred and tried to sit. Eventually Saiban went limp – Nonon could feel his despair and tell that he sensed that, in his present form, Ryuko was so, so far beyond him. It was like he'd been hit with cold reality, that if he had managed to kill Nonon, this *thing* would have made short work of him anyway.

~ “NONON!”~ Uzu shouted over the microphone ~ “Are you okay?”~

“I’m -,” Nonon tried to stand. Big mistake – she immediately felt a rolling wave of nausea, and within seconds her breakfast was on the floor. “I’m alive,” She finally answered as she wiped her face. She couldn’t even begin to explain what had just happened, nor could she ever hope to express how disappointed she was. *Maybe there’s still a way. Maybe now that he’s awake and not on me I can talk to him.*

“Eh, I don’t think it worked,” Ryuko shouted up to the observation chamber, “Do I absorb him now or what?”

*[Absorb me! Now, hold on just a minute!]* Saiban’s panic was overwhelming. What had he gotten himself into? This world was so much bigger than he’d ever imagined, and with creatures like this wandering around – creatures almost as bad as the ones in his dreams – *[I – I didn’t mean - please, listen to me!]*.

“Yeah, alright bucko,” Ryuko regarded Saiban, “Looks like this is the end of the road for you.”

*[I’ll be good, I promise!]*

“No! Please don’t!” Nonon croaked, trying as hard as she could to raise her voice. *Ryuko you barbarian! I was so close, I can’t give up now! I can’t go back to living how I used to, not after everything I’ve done!* “Ryuko listen, please. Let me try again. I have to try again. I don’t care if it kills me, if I can’t wear him -,”

~ “Nonon *NO!*” ~ Uzu again, but she wasn’t listening. She knew he was shocked, but compared to what she was feeling from Saiban that was a minor concern.

*[You - you **want** to wear me? You’d really rather die if you can’t wear me?]* Since Ryuko had humbled him, Saiban’s voice had shifted so dramatically. Before it had been a vicious screech, but now, not only was it human, it was oddly soft.

“Yes, yes I would,” She responded quietly. Ryuko noticed what was going on, and Satsuki had too - she was staring down Uzu to keep him from jumping into the test chamber.

*[You can hear me?]*

“I’m the only one who can.”

*[I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this. Why, little meatbag? Why would you? Where am I? What am I? What is this creature that’s trying to kill me?]*

Nonon couldn’t even begin to explain it all. And there wasn’t time anyway. But maybe, maybe there was some way for her to send something back. She thought, as hard as she could, about the old Honnouji days, the war, Ryuko and Satsuki and Senketsu and Junketsu and the unfettered power of a Kamui. About her year spent training, waiting for this day. She wasn’t sure it was getting though until she felt a response.

*[This is all real? Not dreams? This really happened?]*

“Yes,” Nonon said simply, and somehow Saiban could tell she was telling the truth. Saiban struggled to comprehend it all. This tiny little meatbag, sprawled so weak on the ground before him, was among her kind’s greatest heroes? She’d been... waiting for him? And together, together they could unlock a power to rival his captor’s? He couldn’t believe it, she had to be crazy. Or she’d been dreaming too. What were a meatbag’s dreams like, anyway? “Do you... do you believe me?” Saiban didn’t answer right away, but he didn’t get a chance before Ryuko intervened.

“Listen up,” She barked, “Yeah, I know you can hear me. I don’t know what you and Nonon are talking about, but I know you’re confused now, and in pain, and you think all you need is a little blood so you stay awake. You want to stop that? The only way you’re gonna feel better is if you let her wear you.”

*[You know that? How do you know that?]*

“Here, look at this,” She grabbed at her glittery red streak. “You see? I’m the same as you, I’ve seen all this before.” That was when it clicked to Saiban that this one was the same Ryuko from Nonon’s memories.

*[Your name, she said it was Nonon?]*

“Yes, yes that’s right.”

“Wait, hold on, what?” Ryuko turned to address Nonon, suddenly uncertain if her little speech had done the job.

“Shh! He’s talking!” Nonon said quietly.

“Oh, sorry.”

*[Nonon. The other one, she had a name too, didn’t she? Kinue. Is that right?]*

“Yes. You remember that?”

*[I don’t know. There’s a lot I don’t know. Did I ever have a name? I don’t think so.]*

“You do. It’s Saiban. Kamui Saiban.”

*[Kamui Saiban.]* His instinctive understanding of human language allowed him to comprehend the meaning of the name, but not the context. Still it told him enough. *[I’m something very important, aren’t I?]*

“Yes.”

*[Nonon, I want you to try to wear me. It seems that, if this Ryuko is not lying it might be the only way for me. And if it not, it seems I don’t have any other options. And I know you want to try again.]*

“I’m ready.” Nonon was beaming. She’d solved it! With a little help from Ryuko sure but that hardly mattered. And from Saiban she felt something approximating hope.

Maybe all this nonsense they'd been dropping on him since he'd awoken was true after all. But he would try his best not to mess it up. If the alternative was having Ryuko rip him to shreds and consume him, he would do anything. "We're going to try again!"

There was some protestation from the observers, but Ryuko ignored it. "You serious?" She asked, and when she read the steel in Nonon's eyes she smiled and turned to Satsuki, giving her a nod.

"Proceed!" That was all the command Ryuko needed, and she stood Nonon up and handed her her Kamui, not especially gently.

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This time Saiban let her put him on like a normal dress, only moving on his own to seal himself up in the back (there was no real zipper where there would be on an ordinary dress). She was wearing him, and it was nice to be clothed again, but nothing was happening.

[What happens now?]

"I don't know. There's some way to activate it, but I'm not sure," Nonon said nervously. *Please oh please don't think we tricked you.*

[Is this any better?] Was all Saiban asked, because he didn't really know exactly what he done either. But the result was instantaneous, he'd certainly shifted something inside himself. It was like he'd walked into Nonon's body and turned the lights on. In an instant, all the pain and soreness Saiban's attack had left behind was just... gone. She was standing on her own, reveling in a feeling that she could never have imagined before, bubbling up from her heart. It was beating like so fast it might burst, and she knew she was hyperventilating too, but it was fine. She was fine. Everything was great. It was like some crazy drug.

Saiban too felt a wave of joy and relief as that eternal pain he'd been bearing perhaps since his creation simply evaporated. This was the truth, after all! Nonon grinned when she heard his voice, the first time she'd heard something near to happiness in it *[I got it! Nonon now I understand why they changed me! This is wonderful!]*

Everything was burning.

But not the same way as before. In fact, it was more like the exact opposite. Now, she *was* the fire, a roaring inferno of something beyond mere energy. She lifted her hands up and marveled at them, marveled at how they somehow looked exactly the same even while storm clouds billowed beneath her skin. No, actually they didn't look the same. Bolts of static electricity leapt off them, leapt off her entire body. And they were *glowing*. Ryuko took a step back, grinning. Now this was starting to look familiar.

"Ohhh whoaaa," Nonon mouthed giddily. The glow was growing brighter, the blooming sensation inside her stronger. She was the tip of a vast, foaming iceberg of pure power hiding just below the surface. The thin veneer that kept it all from exploding out was

only that faint separation between her and Saiban. Skin and fabric. And that wasn't gonna hold together much longer. This was *nothing* like a Goku Uniform. Just before the glow became blinding (blinding, but somehow not at all painful), she managed one last glimpse at the observation chamber. Through the shattered window she could see them, Houka, Uzu, Satsuki, all the rest, staring awestruck as the wind that cascaded off her whipped them. Even Satsuki! *Satsuki* was *awestruck*! Nonon and Saiban both were giddy, at this point they barely even knew why anymore. And then the separation was gone.

“Whoa...whoahaha...hahaha...

hahahahahaHaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

As Nonon's laughter devolved into a shrill cry of pure exultance, she could no longer hold the power inside her at bay. Everything went white as golden flames and a swarm of plasma flashes in the shape of four pointed stars immersed their body. Even Ryuko had to leap back from the towering inferno, though for her it was just to save her clothes. But it didn't stop there, the flames shot up in a brilliant column, mushrooming across the ceiling and shaking the entire room until scraps of masonry came tumbling down. And within their recesses, cut off from the rest of the world, Nonon and Saiban both felt the change happen.

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“I think next time we should do this outside,” Houka said, chuckling as he tried and failed to maintain his usual detached attitude despite the soaring elation.

“Lucky for us I thought ahead and told everyone up above that we were firing the particle accelerator today, so it shouldn’t attract too much attention,” Aikuro said.

“Are the cameras still running? Please tell me they’re still up!” Shrio shouted.

“Guys, shut up and look!” Ryuko and Uzu shouted almost at once. To their credit, they did. The view was more than worth it.

Underneath it all, the petite, pink-hair girl standing before them, chest heaving with fits of laughter, was the same Nonon they'd all known for years. But you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise. From head to heel, every inch of her had been transformed. That pale, rosy hair was whipped up above her head, wild and flaming. Two long metallic antennae swept up from within it, curving backwards along the contour of her hair. Beneath that, the bruises on her face and neck were gone, smoothed over by glistening sweat and a lingering glow. And then there was Kamui Saiban himself. Like Senketsu had, he extended over Nonon's shoulders and crept over the upper halves of her breasts, connecting down to his bottom half with silky, membranous strands that draped along her sides. Her pale skin blended with the silver accents, and the glittering emerald green and spiderweb lines of golden light stood out all the brighter for it.

The great, baleful eyes were positioned on long, thin shoulderpads – well, not shoulderpads exactly, they were far from robust. They only connected by a pair of hinges on both sides of her shoulders, curving with a sharp, aerodynamic profile like a wasp's wings. They tilted up and down, surveying their surroundings as Saiban finally really perceived where he was. The

expression was inscrutable, but everybody there had seen Senketsu plenty and knew that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Nonon flexed and stretched her arms, feeling firecrackers soaring through her muscles, and as she did Saiban's sleeves, double helices that slithered down her arms to large, scale shaped gauntlets, glinted in the light. His tights were made in the same pattern, and with the slits in them and the delicate design of his shoulderpads Saiban showed even more skin than either Senketsu or Junketsu had. Not that Nonon minded, she'd known what she was getting into. And that very fact, now that the pain was gone, filled Saiban with a sense of great security. In this huge, scary world she at least knew what was happening, even if he didn't.

One final detail stood out, something totally novel that hadn't been seen on either of the other Kamuis. A massive, voluminous coattail that stretched all the way from Nonon's shoulders down to the floor and back up in a curl.

Mako was the first to speak: "Ohh WOW Nonon! You look awesome!" She shouted.

"Huh?" *They're talking to me? What am I supposed to say?* Nonon couldn't tell if she didn't know where to begin or didn't have anything to say. The only one she wanted talk to now was Saiban. Now that everything had worked out, he had so, so many questions. But they were coming anyway, crowding around all of a sudden, talking all at once.

"Don't *ever* scare me like that again!" Uzu shouted, grabbing her by the waist and hoisting her up, not caring about Saiban's shoulderpads stabbing into him. It took Saiban a second to realize they weren't under attack.

*[Wait, who is this one? He's – what is he to you? You're thinking about something I don't understand. What were you doing with him? I don't understand this.]* Nonon's face went beet red. *I'll explain later!*

"You scaredy-cat," She mumbled as Uzu pressed her to his chest. "I'm alright now. I'm great, actually."

"You sure are. Oh, and uh, Saiban, it's um, it's nice to meet you. My name is Uzu Sanageyama."

*[Tell him I don't understand.]*

"Look, I'll explain later, okay?"

"Uh..." Uzu trailed off. He would have asked something but Mako was jumping on the bandwagon with the introductions.

"I'm Mako Mankanshoku!" She chirped, holding out a hand for Nonon to shake, "It's nice to meetcha!"

"You know... I..." Nonon tried to articulate how dumb this was. "Oh fine," she groaned and took Mako's hand and gave it a good shake, "He says it's nice to meet you too."

*[What? No I didn't!]*

“Well it’s polite!” Nonon hissed.

“Already talkin’ to him, huh?” Mako giggled, “You and your Sunday Best are gonna get along great!”

*[I don’t understand this one either.]*

“Join the club.”

The rest of the group introduced themselves. Gamagoori was more congratulatory to Nonon for having toughed it out, Houka and Shiro immediately switched into data acquisition mode now that the danger was over, and Tsumugu had pulled himself together, but still looked shaken by everything. Nonon sensed no recognition from Saiban when he stood before them. When it was Satsuki’s turn, all she did was smile gently and say, “I knew you could do it,” but the rush of Nonon’s memories introduced her better than she herself ever could. And then, finally, Ryuko came back from her place on the side lines. She’d been observing everything with a happy little smile. She slapped Nonon on the back. Slapped her hard. Hard enough that it whipped everyone’s hair around. And she took it like it was nothing. The thrill of that moment was like nothing else.

“Welcome to the club, Nonon,” She quipped. “I knew you had it in you.”

“Wha-fuck off!” Nonon wasn’t prepared for this oddly friendly response, “You were gonna absorb him, the hell you knew I had it in me!”

“Oh shit, you didn’t see? I winked at you! I thought you were just being a good actor,” Ryuko shrugged, looking truly regretful for having pulled that one on Nonon.

“You’re serious. That was all a trick?”

“Well yeah. C’mon, you didn’t really think I’d destroy your Kamui, right? You only get one.”

“Rrrr, you jackass...”

*[Oh, I get it! That’s what I sensed in her. She had a... Kamui, that’s what I am, isn’t it? And he died. That’s what’s the matter with her. Do you sense it too?]*

Nonon did. It was a second-hand feeling, but she could tell how Saiban saw the world. Everything had a presence, but Ryuko’s felt like a mirage, half there, empty. She didn’t know how to process this sudden burst of pity. But that didn’t matter now. She’d thought that morning she couldn’t be more excited, but now that was nothing. She just needed everyone to leave her alone so she could focus on this indescribable electric feeling soaring within her, see what it could do. Ryuko, Satsuki, even Uzu, there would be time for them later. But they were just distractions, so small compared to what she was now.

For the first time in forever, she was alive.



# In which Saiban asks the important questions

## Chapter Summary

Ooh boy we're going right off the rails with this one. Telepathic conversations are tricky at the best of times. LMK how I'm doing, I feel like this might be insane rambling but I can't tell right now because I'm tired.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2065

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Day 02

**Standard diagnostic tests commenced at 0900. Subject 01 reports feelings of tiredness, as model SK02 attempted contact repeatedly throughout the night. However, Subject 01 also shows enthusiasm for both basic diagnostic tests and further study and claims that model SK02 feels similarly. **

** Regardless, basic physical aptitude tests are well within expected ranges based on the performance of models SK01 and SK03. Athletics and mobility data are convergent with model SK03 immediately following its synchronization [data link]. Durability testing shows a near complete resistance to conventional ballistics and explosives, and resistance to several dozen jamming needles before model SK02 reached its limited and was forcibly powered down [data link]. This is much lower than the durability of models SK01 [data link] and SK03 [data link] after the latter had absorbed a large amount of life-fibers, however no durability records of early-stage model SK03 exist to compare. It is possible that these values would be comparable to those of SK02, although at present we can only speculate. **

**At present, model SK02 shows no ability to assume alternate forms. Tests of absorption abilities were successful, as model SK02 absorbed 600 yards of life-fiber [data link]. Together, this indicates that Subject 01 and model SK02 have achieved synchronization. Their strength is already more than combat ready, but by all indications it is capable of advancing further as model SK02 absorbs more life-fibers and they progress to a closer bond. **

“Whatcha typing?” Nonon asked, leaning over Shiro as he hunched over his computer in the break room.

“Just some notes from today,” He answered casually. It had been a good day, and now that all the data was successfully entered it had become a great day. He was more than ready to

indulge his star test subject's restlessness, give her a test chamber to (literally) bounce around in. At least until Satsuki arrived.

“ ‘Standard diagnostic tests commenced at 0900’ – *wow* this is dry reading,” Nonon capped the sentence off with a spoonful of her Kiwi yogurt and a self-satisfied grin. Even while taking a break Saiban was still powered on – considering that they'd figured out synchronization there was no reason not to. This was only his second experience with food, and he was practically purring with contentment. Nonon hadn't expected that a being such as him would be able to appreciate something as mundane as eating, and it kind of made her appreciate food in a whole new light. She didn't know quite how she perceived what she was tasting, but she knew it had become one of his favorite new discoveries. A life without it, well, that would be one less thing to look forward to, wouldn't it?

“I'll take my notes how I want, thankyou very much,” Shiro said tersely.

“Subject 01? Jesus, what am I to you, a guinea pig? And SK02 – that must be Saiban, right? Saiban, Kamui? Why zero-two? Why do you even bother?”

“SK actually stands for Soichiro Kiryuin. SK01 was Junketsu, SK02 is Saiban, and it follows that SK03 was Senketsu, or Nozomi, as Soichiro had designated him. If we ever design more, they might be the SI line, or maybe the HI, who knows.”

“Ok, sure, fine, it's dumb but whatever. But why even bother? I mean, these are just *your* notes, right? Not like you need all this secret spy code.”

“Actually, it's just to make it easier to do a keyword search when I put it in the database.”

“Wow, looks like you nerds even figured out how to suck the fun out of a Kamui, huh?” Shiro knew she was poking fun with her smarmy jabs, but he still responded with his “no bullshit” frown. Nonon had learned not to be fazed by this a long time ago.

“Didn't you say you wanted to go back in the test chamber?” He asked tersely

“Shh, lemme read. We've got time to kill until Satsuki gets here, right?”

“... Alright, but you can't complain about my writing...”

** Subject 01 reports feelings of tiredness, as model SK02 attempted contact repeatedly throughout the night** Nonon mouthed the words as she read.

Shiro had no idea how right he was on that one. Yesterday had been, despite it all, a tiring day. Even if she was on top of the world she still needed sleep. Uzu had eventually gotten the hint that the chivalrous thing to do was stay over in the lab with her, even though he had early morning kendo classes to teach, including one of Mataro's sessions. It hadn't done a lot of good though. They'd only been snuggled up together for fifteen or so minutes when:

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[Nonon? Nonon!]

“Huh?” She murmured sleepily.

“I didn’t say anything,” Uzu murmured back.

“Not you – it’s Saiban,” She waved a sleepy hand over to rack by the foot of the bed where he hung, unblinking eyes occasionally flitting about as if there was anything to see in the dark, sparsely decorated little cell that was her living quarters in the lab.

*[Nonon what are you doing?]* There was a palpable twitch of nervousness in the feeling she got from him. Why was she going to sleep? Did she *want* to go to sleep? And if she did, would he be alone again?

“I’m trying to sleep.”

“So am I.”

“Jesus, you are such a little bitch when it comes to sleep,” She sat up and gave Uzu and light slap across the back. She’d have to talk to him about that one when he was a bit more awake, this was happening way too often.

*[And why is this one here?]* And internal cringe of discomfort from Nonon. She had definitely not expected Saiban to be *this* innocent and unworldly. But then, what of the world had he ever had the chance to see?

“Alright, alright,” She rolled out of bed, grabbing Saiban’s rack and carrying him down the hall to the empty break room, where she flopped on the couch and positioned him to face her. “So, what’s up?”

Saiban responded not with words but with a feeling of profound relief, intermixed with a tinge of guilt. He didn’t want to disturb this creature that the scientists had chosen to save him, but there was so much he had to come to terms with.

They’d told him about his brothers, Senketsu and Junketsu, about the life-fibers he was made from and the war to stop them from consuming the world, about Ryuko – the one who was somewhere between himself and the humans, about how he was to work with Nonon to keep the peace now that the war was won. But somehow that only lead to more questions, and she was the only one who could talk to him. Without her he’d be all alone again. He needed her.

And she couldn’t hide that, tired though she was, she was excited to be there with him. Every moment with him was a new discovery, a historic step. He had no idea he was *that* important. Or maybe that was just how she felt. It hardly mattered.

“You do know sleep means something very different to us humans, right?”

*[Yes, I know]* He sounded sheepish. But the memories of his long slumber made it clear to both that although he *knew* it, he couldn’t *accept* it. *[I’m sorry, I’ll let you go back.]*

“Nah, I’ll stay up with you,” Nonon shrugged, “I’m sure if a human were asleep for twenty years, they wouldn’t want to go to sleep ever again either.”

*[Except I don't think I can sleep. Or not the good kind of sleep, like you can.]*

“Hmm, well that could be a problem. What are we going to do about that?”

*[We?]*

“Well yeah. After all, we are... er,” Nonon hesitated; it was harder than she'd expected to say the words to someone – something – that was still a stranger to her. That not twelve hours before had seen her as a mere tool to be used for self-preservation. But Ryuko had been reticent too, and that had cost her weeks of lost progress.

*[Stuck together?]*

“Friends,” Nonon corrected him, and was immediately rewarded with a burst of emotion that was, frankly, heartwarming to the extreme.

*[Oh! I thought that with Satsuki and Uzu and all your other human friends]* He hadn't missed how strongly they all played in her thoughts, in her memories, good and bad, *[That there wasn't any room for me!]*. Compared to his words, the strange background of vague thoughts and emotions was running a mile a minute: But then, he'd already known they had some sort of special connection. He just couldn't believe that, after how he'd behaved when she woke him up, that she wouldn't be too frightened to go on. He would have been.

“Don't worry about all that,” Nonon answered the background rather than his direct “speech”, “I get it, you were scared and confused.”

*[But, we still barely know each other]*

“Don't worry about that either. We'll figure it out... You're right, we do hardly know each other, and we are stuck together. But that's not a bad thing.... You'll see, we're stuck together so we can take care of each other,” Nonon said, struggling to come up with the right words. Saiban was so openly, unabashedly sure he needed her, he didn't even bother trying to deny it. Every word and feeling had this undertone that screamed to her “*you are my lifeline in this world, don't leave me alone*”. And there was something gratifying to feeling needed by a being whose power could measure up to armies. Well no, that was their power together. In this form, he was as weak as a kitten, and he knew it.

So of course, she had to try to reassure him. She was his guide, she had to put on a brave face. He understood that it was just a face as soon as she thought that if not sooner, but he appreciated the effort nonetheless. And if he was willing to let her play the part, then she would keep doing her level best. And so, an accord was reached without either saying another word. It was so bizarre to have this... understanding flashing between them, so fast that there really was no way to hide a single thing. But it was even more bizarre how comfortable it was. She wondered idly if this was what it had been like when Ryuko and Senketsu were alone. She was sure she and Saiban were getting along better than they had.

“Well, you can ask now,” Nonon said aloud. “We're supposed to get to know each other, right?”



*[About you and Uzu?]*

“Yeah. He’s my... he’s my boyfriend,” Nonon said, thinking this was doubly odd because this was maybe the third time ever she’d actually used to term to refer to him.

*[Ohh I see now! And that thing in your memories about him? From this morning?]*

“Are you being serious?” *please don’t tell me I’m about to have “the talk” with a Kamui,* “You seriously don’t know what sex is?”

*[Sex? Well I know the meaning of the word, and – oh. Ohhhhh.]* A very particular flash of understanding passed between them, *[Huh.]*

“Really? That’s all you’ve got on that one?”

*[Am I supposed to have something else to say?]*

“Well I don’t know, maybe?” So much for being a guide, but it wasn’t like Saiban blamed her. They were venturing into uncharted territory now and Nonon was really quite thrilled by the prospect. What *would* a Kamui experience if its wearer had sex? Neither of them had any idea. *Nobody* knew.

*[The real question though is if he’s our boyfriend, or just yours?]*

“Well that depends, are you gay?” Nonon asked thoughtlessly, focused on the soft voice in her head that she was sure was a man’s and not the fact that it came from was an *extradimensional* being that had just been flummoxed by the concept of sex itself, “No, let’s back up, are you male? Can you be gay? Are you asexual? Do you even have any concept of any of that?”

*[Male? I don’t see how I could be, considering I was made with your genome, remember?]*

“So, what are you then?”

*[I... I think I’m you.]* At this point Nonon actually broke out in a fit laughter. This was a real thing that a voice in her head had just said to her! *Damn, I think I owe Ryuko an apology for just assuming she was crazy, because this is a trip and a half.* Saiban too had to recognize the absurdity of it - he couldn’t *laugh*, per se, but he did the next best thing and added to Nonon’s mirth. But on the other hand he now also realized that that had sounded very, very silly out loud.

“You know what, I think this is gonna take more brain cells to unscramble than I have right now,” Saiban felt a stab of concern. So she really was going to sleep? But he still needed her! Especially now, now that he was stuck gnawing on the question of human sex and sexuality, something that was all but beyond his comprehension. He needed her.

“I know, I know, but I’ll be here in the morning, alright? And besides, maybe you’ll be able to see what human dreams look like. It’s not just that awful abyss over and over again. They can be pretty nice.”

*[Well, maybe. Oh, but one last thing before you go]*

“Oh, why not,” Nonon answered to his feelings once again and wasted no time shedding her pajamas and putting him on. She had to resist the urge to flip the Seki-tekko and power up – no, now was time for sleep, but when she reclined across the couch, she was surprised to find that with his silky, organic fabric Saiban was incredibly comfortable. *Well, I guess considering that life-fibers are basically made of nothing I’m essentially sleeping in the nude. Ira’s right, it really is the most comfortable way. Ugh, I really hate that I know that about him.* Saiban chewed on these stray thoughts, trying his best not to rouse her and just appreciate that if she was wearing him, she couldn’t possibly go anywhere without him.

Nonon never managed to nod off. She was roused, inevitably, by Saiban’s own contorted efforts not to disturb her. He just had too many questions. But no – he would be patient, the other Kamui before him must have figured out a way. But every little thought and memory that drifted down to him demanded context. Patience was brutal.

“What is it?” Nonon asked. Who could sleep with all that racket?

And so began the first of many sleepless nights in which Nonon learned what it meant to be bonded to a particularly curious Kamui.

## Chapter End Notes

So this was originally gonna be the first half of a longer chapter, but I'm gonna post the other half tomorrowish. It's been a busy week, so my writing time has been diminished but fortunately not nonexistent. Hopefully I can get another chapter up over the long weekend. And to reiterate - if this comes off as too bizarre please do tell me, my brain is soup RN.

# Learn to walk before you can fly

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2065

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Nonon was back in the test chamber obliterating practice dummies when Satsuki arrived. Shiro was pretty relieved when he finally heard the chime of the elevator; nearly half the floor was obscured by the scrap metal from all the vaguely humanoid cylinders she'd pulped, and the floor panels kept delivering more. She leapt and dove between their twirling blades – they were just ordinary steel, if they ever hit her they'd just shatter, but if that happened it would mean she was being careless. And she was having way too much fun to get careless.

If Shiro weren't impressed he might be a little frustrated. He'd coded the targeting AI for their blade arms with Houka, and back at Honoujji they had given even the three-stars a hard time. On the other hand, with Saiban's power she was so far ahead of them she had to come up with challenges for herself – right now, she seemed to be trying to avoid touching the ground at all, plunging down with kicks that crumpled them like tin cans and ricocheting off with a gleeful grin. Houka too was grinning gleefully, and he wasn't even watching at his seat in the corner. There was so much great data to collect here. He did stand up with a friendly wave when the door opened, though

“Nonon!” Satsuki called as Aikuro led her and Rei into the observation chamber. Nonon's high-heeled feet finally clacked onto the ground and she looked up, the same grin plastered over her face. “Having fun down there?”

Nonon responded by cracking her coattail against the ground, boosting off with it like a giant spring and sailing through the air, turning a cartwheel for the sheer fun of it. How cool was it that Saiban had this awesome prehensile tail, neither of the other Kamui had come with extra limbs! Everything seemed to be running in slow motion and even while upside down she knew exactly where she was going to land: leaning jauntily on the windowsill where the glass Ryuko broke yesterday used to be. Saiban's eyes glinted. He seemed to be addressing Satsuki just as much as Nonon was.

“You don't know the half of it.”

*[Which is more true than you meant, considering she **can't** know how much fun I'm having]*
Nonon giggled at that one, which made it look to everyone else like she was just giggling in self-satisfaction. And he was having fun – going faster than the human eye could follow, feeling the metal crumple under fists he never knew he was missing. But more even than the fun they were both looking forward to their first real battle against something that actually put up a fight.

“So I see,” Satsuki chuckled, “I’m glad that yesterday seems to be a distant memory. And tell me, how are you two getting along?”

“Oh, I – we – could write a book. But good, good. Real good. We were up way late last night just, y’know, talking. You probably don’t want to hear it all.”

“And I *know* I don’t want to hear it all again,” Shiro said.

“Need I remind you, you were the one who asked!”

[Does he really not care at all?]

“Nah, that’s just how he is.”

“Well Nonon,” Satsuki said, “I *did* come here to discuss our next move. And I do have other things on the schedule for today. Buuut if I said I wasn’t curious...”

“I had a feeling you would.”

“You eat lunch yet?”

“Uh, kind of.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Satsuki produced a bento box from her bag, “Care to join?”

~~~~~

“So, you two decided that Nonon will do the talking for both of you, and if you disagree on something Saiban will correct you afterwards. Is that right? I want to make sure nobody messes this up.”

“Yeah, about right. I can usually tell if he’s gonna disagree though, so this way we don’t need to have our own conversation every time we try to talk to someone,” Nonon nodded. They’d taken one of the observation chambers so the two of them could have lunch alone (although Satsuki had felt a little guilty about not inviting Rei – not like the thing with Ryuko was her fault, after all). Nonon had no such regrets and now, with just Satsuki, she went ahead and told her nearly everything they talked about the night before and everything about how it felt to activate Saiban and enter into the superhuman.

“That’ll come in handy for people who don’t really understand what a Kamui is, too,” Satsuki noted. Nonon reclined with her feet on a desk and her coattail flicking idly – she hadn’t bothered to power down now, and Satsuki wasn’t going to pretend she minded. Although she still tucked her own feet under her chair, eating slowly and carefully.

“Right. I think it’s what Ryuko was doing with Senketsu too. I don’t know, it just makes sense.”

“Yes, she never really explained that to you, did she?”

“No, but she had it figured out.”

"I don't doubt that. She might come off a little heedless, but when it came to Senketsu she had it all figured out. The idea to train naked was hers and look how that turned out."

"The shoulders of giants indeed," Nonon muttered snarkily.

"Quite. But that doesn't matter, you shouldn't feel like you only succeeded because of her."

"Did I say I did?"

"No, but your tone suggested otherwise."

*[And you do]*

"I'm not acknowledging that," Nonon grumbled, looking down at Saiban's eyes fiercely. But there was no hiding anything from him, she wished she didn't have to give any credit to anyone but herself and maybe the scientists. Satsuki raised an eyebrow, trying to guess what Saiban might have said. "Well, she did save my life, which I never thanked her for."

"Still, it's your accomplishment. I doubt any of the rest of us would have trained nearly so hard, nor been so gung-ho about the whole thing."

"Mmm. Uzu might've, but thanks anyway."

"Oh, yes I suppose he might've," Satsuki chuckled. "And how is he taking everything?"

"Well, he's happy I'm alive, I know that much," Nonon rolled her eyes and pretended to be frustrated that Uzu hadn't more emotive. But in truth she knew how he felt. "But truth be told I think he's a little jealous," She giggled conspiratorially.

"Now, it that because he doesn't have you all to himself anymore, or because he wants to swap places with you?"

"The latter, definitely!" Nonon blurted hastily. "We're not clingy like that!"

*[And neither are we]*

"Right," Nonon agreed despite thinking to herself that Saiban was plenty clingy, but it was different considering he was literally on her body. "Nah, but you know how he is. I'm *sure* he's been eating his heart out."

"I don't doubt it, truly. He never did get his rematch with Ryuko. Well, we'll see about him after your first assignment."

"Don't tell him though – leave it a surprise," Nonon said, and Satsuki nodded in agreement.

“I will say though – I wouldn’t call myself jealous,” Satsuki continued after a short pause, “But I am really very happy for you.” Nonon was already beaming when Satsuki looked up from her food with a sweet smile. “I’m really excited to see what’s next for you. It’s funny though, isn’t it, that after years spent dreaming of the day when all the life-fibers would be eradicated here we are?” If her self from just a year or two ago could see her now she’d be thrown into a murderous rage, but she’d been talking with Ryuko about it the night before. Back at the penthouse, still finding it almost hard to believe that everything had worked out in the end, they had agreed that something that had been missing from their lives had just been reborn. It was scary, yes, and Ryuko was sure she personally wanted as little to do with it as possible, but they couldn’t deny that it was electrifying too.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m still convinced there’s only one good use for them: making Kamuis.”

“Perhaps. So, you aren’t on board with Shiro’s hybrid project, then?”

“Okay, first off, don’t drop that shit on me and expect me to have a good take. All I know is I think one Ryuko’s more than enough. One time, when she first woke up from her coma, I saw her cut a building in half with just the shockwave from her swinging her sword. It was like ten blocks away. And she might live forever? I dunno, can we not talk about that now?”

“I didn’t really want to have a conversation about it either,” Satsuki raised a conciliatory hand, “I was just curious.”

“It does make me think though, how do you suppose people are gonna take this? I mean, considering that everybody knows now that life-fibers equals bad guys,” Nonon looked thoughtful, “And this didn’t just occur to me, I’ve been thinking for a while about how I might win the public trust, so to speak.”

“Oh?”

“Well yeah, like interviews, speeches, photoshoots, that kind of stuff. Maybe do a little disaster response and general-purpose crime-fighting like Ryuko does.”

“I’m sure you’d love the chance to be interviewed, huh?” Nonon had been by far the most vocal way back at the Geneva Trials, as Satsuki had expected. She loved a spotlight, always had and always would.

“Oh I think we certainly would. Although Saiban is more curious about what an interview is like than actually going on one himself,” Nonon correctly surmised, “But he wouldn’t be talking anyway.”

“Well, you’ll be interested to know that the public response probably won’t be as bad as you’d expect. After Ryuko’s TV stunt where she dropped the fact that she herself is made of life-fibers on the world our polls and social media trawling show that a lot of people softened on them immediately. Apparently, she’s so widely beloved that basically anything she supports becomes beloved as well – which makes it good that she almost never appears in public. Also, the association of her and myself with Kamuis basically means that most

people think pretty highly of them – get that they aren't the same as Goku Uniforms. Although I don't think most people understand that they're sentient. Rei or Houka could tell you more."

"Oh, alright then," Nonon said, honestly a little disappointed that she wouldn't have an uphill battle. Saiban, on the other hand, was a bit relieved. He knew from Nonon's memory that most things made of life-fibers were bad news. He did *not* want anyone lumping him with them. Especially not the COVERS, which even he could tell were downright chilling. They almost reminded him of the creatures in his dreams. Only much smaller.

"Not that I think any of your ideas were bad, mind you. I think everyone is going to want to interview you. But again, we'll find that out after your first assignment."

"I would hope so. Can I ask about that, by the way? I know I'm supposed to be attacking a REVOCS base but other than that... nobody tells me shit."

"Oh, certainly. We were going to do a briefing as soon as I got done with lunch but why not go over the basics now?" Satsuki produced a folder from her bag and leafed through it, pulling out several files. The first had several airphotos of what appeared to be a european style mansion with its sprawling grounds, surrounded by dense forest. "Have a look here, both of you," Nonon leaned in so Saiban could see. "This is a mansion up in the mountains near Mt. Arakai. It was previously owned by the Otori family, presumed abandoned following the war. However, one of Ira's prisoners at the max-security lockup indicated that beneath it was hidden an extensive REVOCS base with barracks, production facilities, and databases. Our scouts confirmed that suspicious activity was occurring there – we believe the mansion itself is being used to entertain wealthy donors and cult leaders, the types REVOCS would like to see returned to power. Seismic scans show that there's a sizeable cavern underneath, so it's all but confirmed." Satsuki showed her another page, this one with a confusing diagram that seemed to be an underground cross-section of the earth under the mansion. She wasn't sure if she was reading it right (and was pretty sure Saiban couldn't read at all), but that definitely looked like a big hollow. The type of place a secret base might be.

"There could be anything down there, huh?"

"There might. There may be life-fiber weaponry of many kinds down there, so you'll have to be very careful. What we do know you'll find is the following: Nui Harime's book, someone in the role of base commander, and quite a few die-hard cultists. Your mission will be to capture as many of those things as possible, prioritized in that order. And destroy the rest. Show them they can't hope to win against a Kamui."

"Really, the book comes before the commander? I thought we wanted to know where the rest of their bases are."

"We do, but the book contains not only the cult's ideology but also a breakdown of the devices that Harime and her underlings created. We need to know what they have at their disposal. Besides, at the same time that you attack, Houka will begin hacking their database, so we -."

*[Ryuko's coming]*

“What, seriously?”

“-Uh, sorry?” Satsuki looked up from her papers in confusion.

“Wait a second Saiban says Ryuko's coming.”

“He can sense that?”

*[She's far, far above us on what I can only assume is the surface level.]*

“Yeah, I can kind of feel it through you.” It was a feeling like static electricity, it felt like that half-there shadow was brushing along her skin, so close to touching but not quite. Except it was happening one hundred feet above her head.

~ “I'm going up to let Ryuko in.” ~ Aikuro said over the intercom. ~ “I don't think she's here for the briefing, so we'll let her take some life-fibers while we talk.” ~

“Hmm, I guess she couldn't keep herself away,” Satsuki said. “Well, now's your chance to thank her for saving you. Or, you probably didn't want her coming around, did you?”

“Nah, you know what? This is actually good. I was hoping she'd drop in.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Nonon grinned, “Because that means I get to punch her.”

“She's gonna punch back, you know that right?”

“I'm counting on it.

~~~~~

When Ryuko and Aikuro reached the break room, they were greeted by everyone waiting expectantly.

“Ah hey guys, you didn't have to wait up for me,” She said a little sheepishly after the initial greetings.

“Actually, we were waiting for Aikuro so we can have our meeting,” Nonon corrected her snarkily. “You just happened to distract him.”

“Oh, well then cool. I'm just here to see how everything's going, don't mind me.” This unfazed reaction annoyed Nonon far more than if Ryuko had responded in kind. What was that about? Houka and Shiro, on the other hand, took her at face value and went back to working on their giant multimonitor computers. Satsuki too started fiddling with her papers, getting ready, but Nonon could tell from how straight her back was that she was still

listening. She might as well have been back on her throne at Honoujji, this was the same way she always sat and watched as the elites bantered.

[Shot in the dark, it has something to do with me] Saiban quipped in response to that unspoken question. Nonon was honestly impressed how quickly he'd picked up sarcasm.

"Hey Rei," Ryuko said, turning to address Rei where she sat on her the couch, fully distracted from her work and looking up at her expectantly, "Are you part of the meeting? Cuz I, uh, I got something I gotta talk to you about." Satsuki's face contorted into a scowl – just momentarily. Nonon let her scowl linger much longer.

From the moment she'd seen them together at the holiday party Nonon's mind failed to comprehend how Ryuko and Rei could be an item. Well, were they yet? It was hard to tell. Nonon's sources, mostly Mako since she was home for winter break but also a few of Ryuko's college friends she happened to know, informed her that they'd gone on two real dates and had several post-work hookups when Rei didn't have to stay *too* late. So they were probably not official... *yet*. Just another case of Ryuko being Ryuko really, but Nonon wasn't among those who found it endearing. It just made no sense, what did they have in common besides having tried to kill Satsuki at one point or another? Plus it was a dumb move because, if things didn't work out, they'd still have to see each other all the time because Rei worked so closely with Satsuki. Ryuko never thought of those sorts of practicalities.

[Now they, they are gay. Not that that has anything to do with what you were thinking, I'm just realizing that human sexual dimorphism isn't something I can read in their aura.]

"Well good for you, you're learning," Nonon said sarcastically, unintentionally interrupting Rei as she informed Ryuko that yes, she was needed for the meeting. Ryuko ignored it, just as Nonon ignored her when she said told Rei she'd just wait then.

[Your tone is not appreciated,] Saiban shot back, sounding more exasperated than he was. *[Well, are you gonna ask her to fight us or what?]*

"Oh, right." Nonon, for politeness's sake, did wait until Ryuko and Rei were done.

"-I think I can wait fifteen minutes to hear where you had in mind," Rei was saying, smiling as Ryuko went on enthusiastically.

"Well yeah, that's not the problem. I just don't wanna wait to tell you."

"Life can be so cruel sometimes, can't it?" Rei joked. Ryuko flopped down on the couch next to her and, after a moment's hesitation, put her arm across Rei's shoulder. Satsuki stealthily swiveled her chair just slightly so they weren't in her line of sight.

"Well, if you're sticking around," Nonon said, leaning over Ryuko tauntingly. She wondered if remembering how it felt to be ogled while wearing Senketsu would be enough to make Ryuko stop the natural creep of her eyes. Evidently it was, because she met Nonon's eyes nonchalantly. "I've got something for you too."

“Oh yeah? Now what could you mean by that?” Judging by the wolfish curve of her smile, something Nonon recognized all too well from all their sparring sessions, she knew exactly what Nonon meant.

“C’mon, don’t play coy with me. You wanna go a few rounds? You at full strength, Saiban and me at full strength. How about it? I know you want to see what we can do.”

“Hmm. Honestly didn’t expect you’d want to jump right in the deep end. Cuz you say full strength, you’re gonna get it.”

“Uh, Satsuki?” Rei asked, “Were you planning to stay here and watch the Kamui fight?”

“Well, it’s not on my schedule. But I’m going to say yes.”

~~~~~

~ “Now before you two get started, a little gift for you, Nonon,” ~ Houka said over the loudspeaker, and Nonon took a step back as a floor panel slid open. Across the test chamber, Ryuko didn’t bother leaning in to see just fine, but Nonon had to guess she was watching pretty intently. “Enjoy.”

From the dark recesses beneath the floor, a world of whirring machines and wires, a deep blue-black blade emerged. *My sword!* Nonon thought with a thrilled giggle. Well, it wasn’t exactly a sword. It was even better.

Rising up vertically until the tip was well above Nonon’s head or Saiban’s shoulder-eyes, Nonon’s blade was a beautiful, two sided naginata with smooth, intricate golden detailing in the shape of vipers winding their way up the pole from the center, with their open mouths forming the guards. Nonon wasted no time wrenching it out of the plinth, giving it a few experimental twirls. Perfectly balanced, just a little flex. The hardened life fiber blades glinted in the light.

“Whoahohoho!” She cackled shrilly.

~ “We thought, considering your preference for the quarterstaff, that this would be more your style than a sword,” ~ Houka said, ~ “I hope you don’t mind the snake designs, I just thought they would be fun. We can remove them, if you want.” ~

“Are you kidding?” Nonon shouted back, “And ruin it?”

~ “Oh, well in that case I knew you’d like it all along” ~ Houka said with a chuckle while Shiro rolled his eyes next to him, ~ “It also can separate in the middle – in case you ever run across something you need cross-cutting life-fiber blades to take down.” ~

“Cool,” Nonon separated the halves to see it in action while Saiban “downloaded” the information on how the cross-cutting principle worked. “Very cool.”

*[These scientist friends of yours – I didn’t trust them at first, but they’re very invested in our success, aren’t they]*

“Of course! They’ve only been my friends for basically forever. I know they treated you roughly but *look. At. This.*”

*[It makes an eloquent point. Want to try it out?]*

“You know it. Thanks guys!” She called up to the observation chamber, lest she forget, “I fucking love it!” Then, to Ryuko, “Well, thank you for your patience. But I think it’s time we wiped that smile off your face.”

“Hey man, a blade like that I wouldn’t mind getting stabbed by, so long’s you don’t try and cross-cut me with it.”

“Well duh.”

“Alright, alright, I’m just checking. So, what’re you gonna call ‘er?”

“Oh, shit we need to think of a name!” Nonon said excitedly. She was too caught up in the beautiful, lethal implement in her hands to really wonder about how nice Ryuko was being. Not that she could have guess that, underneath it, a raging torrent of jealousy was barely contained by Ryuko’s confident toothy grin. Just looking at those bloodshot orange eyes, the little antennae poking up from the raging beehive atop her head, that self-satisfied way Nonon carried herself now, reminded her that those days were over for her now. And worst of all was when she talked to herself, blithely unaware of the world as she listened to a response only she could hear – *that’s our thing! She can’t do that!*

But at least someone got to experience it, see what made a Kamui so special. And with her help they’d managed to (mostly) skip that awkward first stage. That was something worth being happy about, even if was a bittersweet happiness. *It’s their turn now, and yeah, I do hope they do it better than we did.*

“Ah, nevermind. Later. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

*[Be careful. It’s hard to get a read on her but I’m sure she’s got a good deal more raw strength than us.]*

“That’s never stopped me before. Okay, you ready?” She shouted across the test chamber, “You, us, full strength!”

“Sounds good to me, but don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

“Funny, I was about to say the exact same thing!”

It was over in an instant. Nonon pushed off the ground with the combined power of her legs, coattail, and the end of the naginata, vaulting through the air at blurring speed. A huge blast of steam and golden fire shot out from the vents on her back and shoulderpads. The glinting blade sang through the air, perfectly lined up to drop directly onto Ryuko’s head where she stood, arms crossed and cocky smile unflinching.

Then the entire underside of Ryuko’s hair lit up with a blinding red-orange glow. It was like her body had caught fire.

*[Wait, something's changed!]* was all Saiban had time for. Ryuko connected a perfect, open fingered jab right to the dead center of Nonon's sternum. She went sailing straight backwards like a speeding bullet and she was pressed against the wall – no, into the wall – ten feet deep in a massive crater that pulped the entire wall and plenty of the ceiling and floor as well. A huge, quaking tremor reverberated through everything as yet more masonry spilled out across the test chamber. As the light faded from her hair Ryuko seemed to suddenly fully appreciate what she'd done.

“Nonon! Shit!” She leaped over to the crater and paused over Nonon. To her credit, she'd managed to hold onto her naginata through the entire ride. “I'm sorry, I – oh shit!” All her bravado was gone now as Ryuko started to peel the concrete away and dislodge Nonon. “You said full power, and I thought you'd be able to take it!”

~ “Nonon! Are you alright!” ~ Satsuki shouted over the loudspeaker. ~ “Ryuko is she breathing?” ~

“I-I'm fine!” Nonon wheezed ferociously, “We're fine!” Try as she might, she couldn't move from the cookie-cutter imprint she'd made in the wall.

*[No, we aren't. I'm way over my limit, I can't protect you any longer. We're powering down.]* Nonon growled in frustration as, in a pulse of light, her skintight battlesuit warped into a dress once more. At least now she was free from the imprint. She could feel Saiban's own frustration. He knew how much this fight meant to her, but it didn't matter any. He was powerless to help her against such a force – if he'd known Ryuko was equal to at least ten of him, he would have told her to back down.

~ “You guys, what the hell!” ~ Aikuro burst into the observation chamber, ~ “You think you could warn me next time before you decide to make earthquakes under a high-tech research facility?” ~

“It's my bad,” Ryuko said, helping a begrudgingly grateful Nonon down to floor, “I'll take the heat. I miscalibrated, went overboard.”

~ “Sure, fine, but from this point on you're not allowed to use any superhuman abilities in my lab, got that?” ~ Ryuko nodded guiltily – this was the first time she'd ever seen Aikuro truly upset. And it was justified, Ryuko knew just enough about science to know that there was plenty of stuff up above her that might go boom with a good shake. Satsuki too felt guilty – she'd been sitting there with everyone else, not expecting anything to go wrong. They'd done indoor training back at Honoujji all the time. But that was a poor excuse, she was supposed to foresee outcomes like this. ~ “That goes for you too,” ~ Aikuro continued, nodding to Nonon, ~ “You do this shit outside, or not at all.” ~

~ “Aikuro, I'm sorry,” ~ Satsuki said, giving him a grave little bow for good measure, ~ “I should have been keeping a closer eye on them, we all should have. I think we just got a little caught up in seeing what Saiban could do.” ~

Aikuro's expression softened a bit. Yeah, he got that. Sometimes it was hard to remember that – with the exception of Rei, who was Satsuki's employee and frankly used to following orders – none of them was older than twenty. He smiled even as he crossed his arms, ~ “I

don't know what I expected, honestly. Let's just hope nobody got seriously hurt up there. And, er, Nonon are you alright?" ~

"Yeah, not hurt," Now that Nonon was on her feet she found that, save for the wind being knocked out of her Saiban's thin energy barrier across her skin had protected her from the attack quite elegantly. And he wasn't the worse for the wear either – he wouldn't be able to power up again for a few minutes, but once he did, he would be good as new. So Ryuko wasn't that much stronger than her. Just ten or so times? "Saiban's fine, too."

~ "Good. I trust next time you're planning to control yourself a bit better, Ryuko?" ~

"Oho yeah," Ryuko nodded, "Don't worry next time I'll make sure to match her properly."

~ "Alright. Now, you two ought to get out of there so we can turn on the auto cleaner."

~~~~

Back out in the hallway, Nonon turned to Ryuko, "So tell me, you powered yourself up just by absorbing life fibers, right?"

"Yup, pretty much. Same deal with Senketsu, too."

"Actually," Shiro leaned his head out the door, "Absorbing the life-fibers is only half the process, there seems to be some hidden "x-factor" we have yet to discover."

"Whatever, it's close enough. Well then, I guess that's the silver lining in this – we can probably do the same," After that crushing defeat, Nonon was feeling oddly philosophic. She was probably stupid to think it would all come easily. No, they weren't done yet, and that was a good thing. She had something to look forward to. What made it all better was that she knew it was doable. Anything was possible now, even if it took a little more time than she'd expected. She would beat Ryuko at full power eventually.

"I mean, I bet you guys still have tons of room to grow. Looks to me like you're about where me and Senketsu were when we first learned to sync, and after we absorbed a couple three-stars it was like a night-day difference. You haven't learned how to evolve yet, have you?"

[Evolve? I know the meaning of the word...]

"She means like change forms and stuff. She picked the wrong word because she's dumb or something."

"Hey!" To her credit, this was as far as Ryuko went butting into the conversation between Nonon and Saiban.

[Ah I see. Because that's not at all what evolving means. So, what could I do?]

"Oh, well Senketsu had this one where he covered himself in spines, Junketsu could shoot his shoulderpads like harpoons, and they both eventually gained the ability to fly."

[Fly] Saiban picked up the particular thrill in her when she said that, *[Sounds useful]*

“Oh it’s more than useful. So, whaddya say, want to try that?”

[Well yes I would. But, but what I really would like is to get out of this lab. See some of the places you’ve told me about. I think it’s been put off long enough especially now that we can’t fight Ryuko here]

“Well yeah, so do I. I mean, we’ve gotta continue this shit outside, right?” She asked Ryuko, “I know it wouldn’t be at your full power but do you wanna find a place to get in a little sparring anyway?”

“Sure, I’m on break, nothing better to do with the afternoon.”

At this point Shiro interrupted again. “Don’t you remember what Satsuki said in the briefing Nonon? You can’t leave the lab until we’re ready to attack the base so REVOCS can’t possibly get wind that Saiban exists.”

“Ugh, seriously?” Nonon groaned. They couldn’t wait another night. “Fine, then let’s do it now.”

“Wait, now? But -,”

“- Just give Saiban enough time to recharge and we’ll be ready to go.”

“Well nothing else is.”

“What else is there? Just a helicopter to get me there and Houka and I’m sure he’s been ready to hack them for days now. C’mon, we can’t stay here another night we’ll go stir crazy!”

“Hey, I’ll loan you my bike if you want so long as you park it outside the splash zone,” Ryuko offered.

Satsuki had been half listening to the exchange from in the observation chamber, and eventually reached a decision of what to do. She understood their restlessness plenty, but at the same time there was too much at stake to go in half baked.

She wound up staying the night over with Nonon. They sat in the storage facility, bathed in the blue lights of the life-fiber pods as Saiban consumed yards upon yards of the red threads, playing cards with the scientists and eventually Uzu (when he got back from his Kendo lessons) until late in the night. It was oddly fun. The intent was just to keep Nonon occupied as best she could, but on the other hand when had any of them ever had a normal slumber party growing up? She only wished Ryuko could have been there too, but as near as she could tell she’d invited Rei over to the penthouse to stay the night. Being with everyone else helped her not to think about that, either.

And when they woke up the next morning they were ready to deliver judgement onto REVOCS like they had never known.

Chapter End Notes

This one became a little longer than expected as I decided to flesh out the conversation between Nonon and Satsuki, cover more topics and show that they're close friends by how they talk to each other. Next chapter will be the last in this very Nonon focused segment. We'll get back to some more Ryuko stuff and then who knows? (I do)

Also, power scaling. Generally speaking I read KIK as having “tiers” with minor variation inside the tier rather than a dragonball style numbers system (which is never the best option) and even then the tiers can be surmounted by skill like when Satsuki stalemated Nui on the Naked Sol (even though Nui is comparable to a Kamui). Here Nonon gets wrecked mostly because she didn't expect Ryuko to be so damn fast, not because she couldn't possibly have held her own.

The debut

Chapter Summary

Part 1. It's just split to keep each individual part from being too long and give you a stopping point if you want. Basically setting the stage for what comes next.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 2065

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“Hey, I was thinking,” Ryuko said, reclining across the bench along the right side of the helicopter bed, “Since we’re not exactly trying to sneak in the leader’s probably gonna bolt, so maybe when you attack them head on I sneak in through the back, grab ‘em and the book, and scoot.”

Across from her, Nonon scoffed, “Are you kidding? And let you take the credit? This is my debut – my prize. I’ll collect the assets, thank you very much.” She crossed her arms resolutely, which also helped with the draft blowing through the open doors. She’d insisted on leaving them open – Saiban was staring in awe at the grey-brown expanse of the barren winter woods, rolling hills interrupted by the occasional measly village. So this was the outside, how amazing! *If you think this is something just wait until spring*, Nonon thought, but he didn’t care. His eyes peeked out and darted around wildly from the unzipped collar of the parka she wore over him.

“Hey man, not like I care that much,” Ryuko stretched her arms, unruffled by the cold, “I’m only here ‘cuz Satsuki asked me to. Had a whole day planned with Mako and everything – we were gonna go down the park, get some lunch, go mess around at the museum, get some din-,”

“Yeah I get it!” Nonon groaned. “Well then, if you don’t care, you’ll be fine posting sentry in the woods and waiting for if I need backup, won’t you?”

“Sure, whatever,” Ryuko nodded, and they rode the rest of the way in silence. Eventually Satsuki’s voice piped in from their earpieces – she and the scientists and Uzu, Rei, and Ira were all cloistered up in a dark little ops room someplace in the government compound that had sprung up where the old Kiryuin Headquarters used to be, watching screens project the image from the tiny cameras on the earpieces. She wasted no time informing them that they were over the drop point, and they booth stood up with a stretch.

“Welp, looks like it’s showtime, you ready?” Ryuko leaned out the door.



“Been ready – let’s roll!” Nonon may not have been a superhuman herself, but with Saiban’s help the seven story drop to the forest floor held no fear for her - even while powered down he could absorb that much shock no problem. She leapt out the door on her side with a whoop, and Ryuko followed not far behind, plunging through the morning breeze with reckless abandon. Her face scrunched up in confusion though, when their feet padded softly down on the side of a featureless asphalt road, no mansion in sight.

“Uh, what gives? There’s nothing here.”

~ “Ryuko...” ~ Satsuki sighed through the earpiece. Ryuko’s cheeks burned just a little at that evident disappointment.

“Seriously? Do you never pay attention or just not during important briefings? This is as close as they can put us without setting off alarms!” Nonon’s exasperated, shrill tone pricked Ryuko’s temper, but she did have a point.

“Ohhh. Oh. Wait, does that mean we have to walk?” Ryuko groaned.

“Yup, and since you don’t know where it is you can’t even speed ahead,” Nonon said with a little snarky joy at Ryuko’s displeasure.

Ryuko groaned again, this time a big, nonverbal “ugh”. But she pulled herself together, Satsuki and Rei were listening so she couldn’t be *too* whiny even if it would annoy Nonon, “Alright, then lead the way, miss shot-caller.”

~ “Enjoy the walk, you two,” ~ Satsuki intoned, ~ “We’ll check in when you’ve arrived at the desination.” ~ And so began the morning hike, a mostly silent affair as Nonon and Saiban psyched themselves up and Ryuko idly wondered what they might find inside that hidden base. Maybe something that could give a decent fight? Oh who was she kidding, if Nonon couldn’t then what chance did they have?

~~~~~

When Minazuki first saw the Otori Mansion, she’d been worried. Worried that the aboveground component, the mansion proper, would be her new home. That she would be living an idle life with the other nobles who huddled there – a political piece, not a vital piece of an active guerilla machine. Every day of that first week she saw soldiers leaving on missions at all hours, and not nearly as many coming back. Not that she wouldn’t have taken it, knowing that Satsuki was after her it made sense to disappear. But she was happy when she told Kuroido she wanted to play a more active role, do Takamori proud, and he listened and opened the door – down into the real REVOCS.

Now, months later, it was a morning just like any other. She got her coffee and her breakfast delivered to her quarters, then went down to the mess hall anyway to preside over everyone. The soldiers nodded respectfully as she passed, calling her “Lady Minazuki” with all due deference. Although they referred to each other as “brother” or “sister”, an oddly fraternal turn for such hard-bitten rebels.

But then they were an odd bunch, with lots of strange sayings and habits she hadn't fully mastered yet. As near as she could tell there were two kinds – young, untrained idealists, fired up about what a travesty the new government was and how something had to be done, and the grizzled veterans. They were a quiet bunch, spent a lot of their time in that strange, dimly lit chapel that was one of the only rooms Minazuki hadn't been in yet. She'd told Kuroido, when he'd asked if she would join them for mass, that she claimed no affiliation to any religion, and he'd shrugged and said, "Perhaps one day". But she was having trouble telling exactly what religion they followed; all she'd seen of it was that plinth in the spotlight with the huge tome on top, and it didn't look like anything she could recognize. Still, they'd accepted her as one of their own, so she could put such eccentricities aside.

"Mornin'," She was greeted as she entered the command center with the only informal greeting she would receive all day. This was Akiari, security chief and quartermaster of the compound, second only to Kuroido in this particular cell. He sat with his feet on the long table, watching the screens roll by without much apparent interest. Minazuki was respected by the rest of the compound, but he was the only one she really spent all too much time with – the rest of the officers were old and cynical and not interested in humoring her when it came to practicing martial arts (as a Kiryuin she was expected to know her way around a blade, but she wasn't content to let herself be just passable forever) or the ins and outs of command. And there was something about Akiari, with his permanently half formed hair, easy smile, and that laid-back attitude that seemed to bely a sort of perpetual somberness.

"Akiari, how're you today?" Minazuki smiled back. "Gonna work on breaking in your 2-star again?"

"Nah, it's my turn to feed Chibi and the wolf-rats today, I figure that'll be plenty of warmup for it. You're welcome to watch by the way, I know you're a fan of them."

"Maybe I will," She nodded, sitting on the table, "I never get tired of watching the transformation sequence."

"And yet you don't want one of your own, huh?" Akiari fiddled with the lapel of his suit, at first glance just a normal, although very well-tailored, black and maroon three-piece. But it was too smooth, too shiny.

"I said I liked watching, didn't I? That's for a reason."

"Fair enough," He tilted his head at the suggestion that she might be admiring his physique during the transformation. She hadn't invited him to her quarters yet, but she'd definitely considered it. He was of the lesser nobility, the retainer to the Otori family, so he wasn't a bad match by any means. She'd been here for months without a man, and he'd been here even longer. "And then after that... Well I do have to pick a team for the next op, you're helping with that, right?"

"Yeah, although truth be told I haven't settled on any of them yet," She chuckled. She would only admit such failings to him.

"Well, we've got time, we could review the files now?"

“Mmm. So, you really think it’ll work this time?”

“Honestly, HQ says it has to.” “HQ says” was one of Akiari’s favorite phrases. Minazuki didn’t know who ran the show at the REVOCS headquarters, hell, she didn’t even know where it was. There were some secrets she just hadn’t been there long enough for. “It sucks that we haven’t been able to find a single piece of dirt on her, she covers her tracks too well. If we could just discredit her, then this wouldn’t be necessary. But here we are.”

“And the research complex is the best place to do it?”

“Well, if we’re lucky we might take a few of her lackies out as well, and -,” Akiari was interrupted quite abruptly by a loud siren emitting from the front of the command center, where a wall covered in various screens with security feeds from around the compound stood above the table. They both stood up at alert. “Ah hell, intruder alert?” Akiari groaned, “Probably just the peasants from down the road again.”

They wouldn’t be so lucky, it turned out. In a moment Kuroido burst in, his corpulent little body heaving with exertion. “They found us!”

“What!” Minazuki and Akiari shouted at once.

“Look! At the gates – it’s -,” Kuroido pointed to the screens. No, there was no mistaking it. But how? How was that all too familiar pink-haired devil standing there, amidst the ruins of the gatehouse, wearing... that?

“No... is that – that’s really a Kamui, isn’t it?” Minazuki mouthed, despair crashing into her as she stared at the thing in the shape of a woman as it picked itself up and bounded across the gardens. “But how? How could she have made something like that?”

“Jakuzure! Damn, I guess this really is it! Begin the evacuation!” Akiari shook himself to usefulness. Minazuki, on the other hand, was gaping, at a complete loss. So, this was it then. What happened when you went against the new queen. It was inconceivable, the hypocrisy of it. All life-fibers had to be destroyed, huh? Then what do you call that - that *thing* you’ve made out of your little girlfriend? The cold, dead eyes on the shoulderpads flitted up to the camera as bullets plinked harmlessly off the Kamui and its body, and then the feed descended into static.

“Server room! Wipe all hard drives and prepare for evacuation!” Akiari shouted into the intercom. The voice on the other end was frantic.

~ “Sir we’re trying! But - but we’ve been hacked!” ~

“Argh! Fucking Inamuta!” he snarled, and then, reading the evident panic on Minazuki and Kuroido’s faces, straightened his back and put on a grim face, “You need to get out of here. Get the other officers together, take the exit tunnel.”

“Wha – wait we? What about -,” Minazuki began to protest.

“I’ll be fine,” Akiari shrugged. “I should have seen this coming, now I’ve gotta clean up my mess.”

“You’re not seriously going to fight her, are you? You won’t stand a chance!”

“I’ll be fine, I’ve got my *Huskarl* and my life-fiber sword. I’ll end this in a single blow.” He looked over to Kuriodo, who was still knee deep in his panic, bustling around grabbing up papers and shoving them into his bag. He might’ve been in command, but he wasn’t in control. “I leave this in your hands, Minazuki. Good luck, and goddess bless you.”

“Be careful!” Minazuki called, but he was already gone. Minazuki was left gaping, her stomach curling in on itself. He was going to die. Then she was probably going to die. But before that the base was going to be destroyed, and the REVOCS resistance would be one defeat closer to destruction. This was what she signed up for, wasn’t it? Akiari was counting on her not to make his sacrifice in vain. She turned on the intercom.

“All combat personnel prepare to engage the enemy! All non-combat personnel gather all assets and proceed to the exit tunnel! Move people!”

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Mere minutes before Minazuki’s morning was so dreadfully interrupted, Nonon got her first glimpse of the mansion. It was just like Satsuki had described it, an ostentatious, multi-story European-style structure nestled into a valley and ringed by gardens, greenhouses, tennis courts, and hedgerows. She was alone now, Ryuko had peeled off into the forest not long ago, vanishing into the bare branches. She was out of eyesight, but Saiban could still feel her out there, perched somewhere with a good vantage on the scene. But even Ryuko’s overwhelming aura – that’s what Saiban called it, but Nonon thought of it in a manner more comprehensible to her: scent – was overshadowed by the vast glow beneath the mansion. Something down there reeked.

*[So many, I can’t even tell where one ends and the next begins!]* He couldn’t decide to be nervous, excited, or just plain curious. Saiban needed no more persuasion to proceed, though. He knew what he was made for, and he was dying to come to grips with a real enemy just as much as

“One big nest full of rats,” Nonon quipped. Surveying the wrought iron front gates, she noticed that the small towers on each side were clustered with the silhouettes of men. Yet more sentries seemed to be patrolling the gardens on the other side.

*[Now I know your plan, but those humans have guns. I can only protect you against a few bullets like this, we should transform now.]*

“Nah trust me, this is gonna be awesome,” She carried on up the road.

~ “Trying your ‘big reveal’?” ~ Satsuki asked over the earpiece.

“Yup!”

~ “Alright, just don’t hesitate when the time comes.” ~

“Oh don’t worry, we’re itching to get started.”

~ “I’ll let you work then. Good luck.” ~

“As if I need it.”

~ “Good luck babe, whack ‘em once for me!” ~ Uzu cut in, almost over her. She frowned.

“Ugh, don’t call me babe you dope!”

~ “Aw, but I’m the only one who gets the chance to call ‘earth’s mightiest warrior’ babe, babe!” ~ Nonon groaned into the mic.

“You’re lucky I can’t hang up,” She growled.

*[He’s proud of you, don’t take it for granted].* At those words from Saiban Nonon’s face went a little red. It became much worse when she heard Ryuko making wet kissy noises over the earpiece.

~ “C’mon!” ~ She whined ~ “Fight the baddies already!” ~ Nonon wasn’t about to argue with that.

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“Halt!” The call came down from one of the towers and Nonon heard the telltale click of rifles being shouldered in her direction. “This is private property!”

“Oh? Why, I could have sworn this place was abandoned!” Nonon tapped her chin thoughtfully, looking up at the guards with their grizzled, blank faces. She pulled a pout and batted her eyelashes in her most adorable way, giggling internally.

“Nonsense! These lands have been in the Otori clan for generations!” *Nothing like a little bald faced lie, huh?*

“Oh really? Then, you don’t suppose I could talk to the master of the house, could I?”

“Depart now, or force will be used against you!”

“I’m not in the habit of asking twice, boys, so I’ll give you a chance to reconsider,” The guards took an uncertain step back. The local villagers were easy to scare off, you didn’t usually even need a warning shot. This was different.

“This is your final warning!”

Nonon sighed, as if frustrated. These morons were fun to toy with, but enough was enough. Her fingers twitched with the urge to turn the Seki-tekko. Instead, she took a coy

step forward, “So what happens if I do this?” The report of a burst of bullets in response was near instantaneous, squeezed out by the nervous fingers of a fresh recruit who had no idea what the hell he was getting himself into.

Everyone froze. The last shot had, by pure coincidence, struck Nonon directly in the chest. The sergeant slapped his charge upside the head, “No firing discipline!” he shouted as the recruit belted out his apologies. The other guards relaxed a little as they watched the chastisement, expecting that they’d have to dispose of a body soon. Might as well watch the newbie get his lumps first

“I’m fine, by the way,” Nonon said casually, and suddenly all eyes were on her. Brilliant emerald shone through the hole in her parka – Saiban’s energy field and his own impenetrable fabric held together like a charm and she was standing just as nonchalant as ever. “So, looks like we’ll be doing this the hard way. Don’t feel bad though,” Nonon was having a blast watching the shocked expressions on the guard’s faces, and it was only going to get better. She reached up into her hair – there was a pin holding it up – she removed it, and in her hand it warped, unfolding upon itself over and over again like a butterfly knife, but growing impossibly as it did so. This was a trick Ryuko had taught her – or really taught Saiban – on the way here: Shrinkning her naginata down to a miniscule size and expanding it back to combat-ready in mere milliseconds. She could swear she saw the whites of the guard’s eyes bugging out as they saw the wicked double-bladed weapon appear in her hands, “The hard way was really the only option.”

“Open fire! Sound the alarm! Sound the alarm!” the sergeant suddenly understood what was happening. The pink-hair, by the goddess of course that was familiar! Why hadn’t he noticed before! A hailstorm of bullets sang through the brisk winter air, but it was already too late. Nonon’s Seki-tekko was an improved design over Ryuko’s – not a glove but a simple silver bracelet. All she had to do was rotate it to open the valve and let the blood flow, and she could do that with one hand by running it across her thigh. The guards could only watch in horror as she did just that, and her parka was shredded as Saiban exploded off her in a burst of raw golden light.

If the first transformation was like surfing a tsunami, then the subsequent times were like wading into the ocean on a hot summer day. She closed her eyes and let the change take her. Nonon didn’t see the fibers wheeling around her, contorting across her naked form in a whirlwind. She didn’t see the great, draconic figure rising up behind her, the flaming shadow of a vast, incomprehensible creature that roared a disorted, unearthly tone as it sunk its jaws around her. She didn’t see it lash itself down, that monstrous shape shrink-wrapping down into her chestpiece, the ribbons on the sides of her belly, the helical sleeve and tights, the bladed gauntlets. But she felt it all, and she knew when the time had come to throw her head back, shoulderpads erupting from her flesh like bared fangs, and scream like shrill thunder:

“Life-fiber Synchronize! Kamui Saiban!”

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter should be up very soon, probably sometime today! I imagine it might be a little frustrating that I keep splitting these up, sorry about that. I just don't want to have thousands of words ready and not give people the chance to read them.

Cheerily, Jauntily, and Utterly One Sidedly!

Chapter Summary

Part 2(3). Nonon fights Akiari, Saiban proves his usefulness.

I know this is an action chapter, and it's easy to skip action chapters in favor of fluff and romance chapters (I've been guilty of it before), but at this point you know what I'm about and I'd say don't skip please.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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The moment her transformation was finished Nonon surged forward like a woman possessed. No good messing around now that the alarms were blaring. A few guards with more sense than courage were bolting, leaping off the towers or trying to make it down the stairs. They couldn't outspeed her though, in fact those that kept shooting couldn't even keep on target as she bounded to the gate and unleashed a mighty punch right into the center. With a rumpling, wrenching noise, the wrought iron flew away into the gardens, taking the cobbling of the towers with it like a wave of rock. The fallen guards buried in the rubble were of no concern to her now, nor were the others that came rushing around to try their hand at using mere metal to put her down.

But they were ordinary humans; all they could do was watch her passage in terror. If they didn't run off into the woods, she would be back for them when the book and their leader were recovered. And if they did, then it was out of the frying pan, into the fire, because Ryuko was out there *somewhere*. She didn't know where anymore, Saiban was overpowered by the scent from below, drawing them in like a pretty green vulture.

"Mhmmhmm...ahahaha!" Nonon couldn't help herself. Oh, how she had missed the feeling of maelstroms of bullets glancing off her skin like rain! It was a little cruel, she had to admit, striding past them without even a glance. But *come on!*

That, and to be quite frank she wasn't sure that with this strength she would be able to stop herself from killing them accidentally.

Security cameras, on the other hand, she did spare a moment for. The less whoever was watching them knew about where she was, the better. She leapt across the gardens, past withered lilies and glossy evergreen bushes, smashing cameras and blithely ignoring the men around her. Inevitably she came to front door. What lay beyond?

*[Only one way to find out!]*



“Hehehe,” Nonon raised her hand, “Knock – knock!” The door vanished down the massive foyer as soon as Nonon’s fist connected with it. She strode in, heels clicking on the hard marble tiles. Inside, the signs of chaos were everywhere, the nobles who had been living there had left in a hurry. Nonon wandered through the rooms undisturbed– the guards hadn’t bothered to follow her. She wandered through huge salons, galleries of fine art and antiques, and other such lavish accommodations. She wondered aloud, “Now if I were putting a secret entrance in here, where would it be?”

*[I feel something, over there!]* A scent, but not the powerful, glowing pungency of life-fibers. A living creature. She followed the trail and kicked open the door into a bedroom. There, she stalked to the closet and flung it open to find a nobleman huddled there, puffy and wrinkled and scared out of his wits. In his silk pajamas, it seemed the alarm had caught him napping. He looked familiar, she might have seen him at some high class function, but he certainly didn’t recognize her now. She dragged him from his hole, kicking uselessly, and threw him out onto the hardwood floor with a heel on his back. He groaned in pain.

“Aw, don’t be like that. If I wanted you dead,” Nonon’s tone shifted and dropped quite abruptly then, “you wouldn’t have seen me coming.”

*[Is this really necessary?]* Saiban asked, but he knew Nonon was having fun playing the rampaging monster, thinking back to all the years she had to spend putting up with insufferable bores like him, complicit or actively involved in so much corruption and destruction. *[Also, something big is coming.]*

“Now, where’s everyone run off to, hmm? Why don’t you tell me, and maybe I’ll be nice. But if you don’t, well, I make no promises.” At this point Nonon could hear it too. Footsteps just outside the door. The metal *schwing* of a sword being unsheathed.

“Let. Him. Go.” *Now here we go, a proper adversary.* Nonon turned to regard him with the corner of her eye. A tall, strong-jawed young man with a ruffled coif stared back at her from the doorway, sword held high, point nearly at her shoulder blades. She could feel the irregularity of his breathing. The black and maroon suit he wore that was so clearly a life-fiber weapon rose and fell sharply. He knew that even in this disadvantaged position she was still beyond dangerous. “One false move and I’ll gut you right now.”

“You really want to do this here?” Nonon sighed, lifting the back end of her naginata to press the blade against his. Try as he might, he couldn’t resist as she slowly, daintily lowered his blade to the floor. *That’s not all you’ve got, is it?* She asked with a raised eyebrow, but she had a suspicion judging by what Saiban sensed that he wasn’t at full power yet. “Cuz I’m ready to make a mess.”

“I can’t allow you to threaten this house any longer.”

“Good. Then just show me how to get into the secret base and I’ll be on my way.” He didn’t answer that one, but drew his sword back into a ready position. “So, it’s gonna be like that, huh?”

She wasted no more time, surging forward faster than he could react. With a hand on his lapel she dug in her heels and pitched him as hard as she could, splintering wooden walls and tile floors as he blasted through several rooms and floors down to the ground floor. A booming crash echoed through the mansion as rugs and furniture and dust flew everywhere. He unfurled in the middle of the vast foyer, and as Nonon followed through the tunnel he'd carved she was pleased to see whatever he was wearing was tough enough to survive that.

"Ah, much more room to work, eh?" She dropped to the floor, stretching and giving him a chance to stand up despite Saiban's wondering if maybe they should finish him quickly and keep moving. He already realized that it was best if they didn't "talk" during a fight, using feelings and stray thoughts to communicate during a fight was less distracting. And besides, as much as he wanted to get this job done successfully and get on with exploring the outside world, he did want fight too. "Alright, go ahead and transform now."

"Heh, decided to stand for a fair fight after all? Very well!" He swooped back upright, holding his sword aloft. "But before we begin, perhaps an exchange of names?" *Oh lovely, he's chivalrous. Either that or stalling.* "You have the honor of facing Akiari Hondou, retainer of the Otori clan. Tell me, young Godrobe, what do they call you?"

"Eh? Godrobe? Seriously? I'm Nonon Jakuzure. Honestly, I expected you'd recognize me."

"Wait, you're still in control? No, you lie. No ordinary human can resist the influence of a Kamui."

"Well, think what you want, but me and Saiban here are a team," She shrugged, "Now c'mon, let's see your Goku Uniform transform. Don't have all day here," She twirled her naginata to accentuate the point, dragging it effortlessly through the marble tiles to leave deep gouges.

"A Goku Uniform? I'd afraid you're the one mistaken this time. This is an Ultima Uniform - far beyond your primitive Goku models. Behold!" A pulse of crimson light enveloped Akairi as the suit whipped off his body. It was definitely a different transformation that Nonon was used to.

Rather than coalescing into a flat, star shaped glow that crept along, enveloping the body and coating itself across it like a layer of paint, the suit instead simply unwound itself, individual fibers winding free into a big red coil of life-fibers and ordinary fabric. It reminds Nonon of how the COVERS ensnared their prey. Once the entire outfit was lifted off his naked body, it sprung to life and descended upon him, weaving into a new shape. It resembled samurai armor, at first, but that was only in profile. The helmet was about right, and so were the flat plates on the shoulders, but beneath that the plating unfurled off Akairi's torso like a flower, patterns on their undersides that resembled solar panels glinting in the light. The armor beneath his waist sash was light too, just a streamlined set of tassets, long greaves, and boots with sharp hooks on the toes. Nonon couldn't help but be a little surprised. This wasn't supposed to be a Kamui, right?

"Uh, Shiro? Explain." She demanded of her earpiece.

~ “Innnteresting,” ~ came the response, ~ “They have incorporated the principle of minimal skin contact into their uniforms. Like the final versions of the regalia series – practically mini-kamuis. Be on your guard – I’m detecting a life-fiber concentration similar to a two-star uniform, but it should be considerably more dangerous.” ~

“You look surprised!” Akiari shouted coldly, luxuriating in the power, the aggressive instinct that came with such a uniform, “This is my two-star *Huskarl* model Ultima Uniform! Its defenses are -,”

“ – Yeah yeah!” Nonon leapt off the ground, flinging her naginata above her head as her tail propelled her towards Akiari, “That’s all I need to hear!” *Two-star? Shouldn’t be too hard.* She wouldn’t make the same mistake as with Ryuko, though. Rather than bring the blade down on Akiari’s head, she hit the ground running and skidded behind him, far faster than he could react. Crouching low, she spun in for a vicious attack to the unfurled plates on his back, a black arc dead on to his exposed skin.

But then the blade stopped, a feeling like a powerful magnetic repulsion holding it half a foot from his skin. Try as she might, she couldn’t muscle through it. Nonon’s eyes went wide, realizing something was wrong, and with a precise bounce she was gone again - just in time too, as Akiari’s sword sliced through the air where she had been.

“It won’t be so easy!” He shouted, “The energy fields projected from the plates of my *huskarl* reflect *one-hundred-percent* of the energy thrown at them! Even a life-fiber blade can’t get through! I won’t lie, you are faster than me Nonon or Saiban or whatever you call yourself. But I only need to land one hit, whereas you’ll have no such luck with my ultima uniform! Your rampage ends here!”

“Is that all?” Nonon remembered to keep her cool and lunged back at Akiari. This time, she met him with a clash of blades, propelling herself with golden flames and enough force to push him an inch into the floor. “Then looks like I’ll just have to wear you down!”

Now the duel began in earnest, and Akiari had not been mistaken, he just couldn’t keep up. Not only did a Kamui offer better raw speed, but between the coattail, the length of the naginata, and her own two legs Nonon had four limbs to work with. She used them all to full advantage, tripping him with her tail while throwing in kicks, then vaulting off on the polearm’s length. He would block one strike, two, then she would get one through, letting it glance off and twirling it back between her fingers for another one. Whenever he came a bit too close, she would bounce off, seeming to defy gravity, perching on a statue of some famous, long dead Otori man and letting Akiari shatter it in his bullish rage. He was powerless to touch her.

~ “Nonon you have a plan, right?” ~ Shiro asked.

~ “Hey c’mon dude, let her work.” ~ Ryuko said when Nonon proved too busy to respond.

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Down in the command center, Minazuki watched the fight with bated breath. He was holding on better than she'd expected, even if there was no way he would ever hit the tiny, twisting, steam puffing woman. She could barely even *see* Jakuzure at times. But the longer he kept his feet, the longer they had. Most of the science team and the officers were already gone, she was left watching after Kuroido, who seemed to have given up all too easily. But the soldiers were staying, of course. That was their job.

~ My lady, the one-stars are prepared to support lord Hondou." ~ a sergeant called in deferentially ~ "All the men without Ultima Uniforms have been ordered to retreat." ~

"Good, have them move to surface and surround the intruder. Quickly now!"

~ "My lady," ~ This time a scientist called in ~ "We're picking up a massive signal from the forest. It's Matoi." ~

"Matoi!" Minazuki felt a terror at the name. They really were screwed now – if the strongest fighter they had at this base could only stalemate Jakuzure then the living weapon would annihilate them all. But yet, one thing she did know was the HQ considered it a number one priority to capture Matoi, alive. Why, or even how, Minazuki had no idea, but the whole point of sending the assassins after her had been to goad her into retaliation. Evidently it had worked. So maybe, maybe this would be a way to turn this defeat around! And if it didn't work then all that resulted was a few dead soldiers. And they were going to die anyway. It was worth a shot.

"Send out a capture party at once!"

~~~~~

Akiari made for an impressive punching bag, but despite that Nonon had to admit she was getting frustrated. She knew he was only here to stall her, but honestly that didn't matter. What did matter was that she was getting bored. Bored! Her first ever Kamui fight, and it was boring her! Against such an impenetrable, useless enemy how could she not be, and even though a visor covered his eyes she could tell Akiari knew what he was doing. For the sake of her entertainment she had let him push her back up the stairs, and here the height difference made it a little more fun – when she was above him she could kick him in the face, and when she was below it was easy to kick his shins. Of course, it didn't matter any, but it was kind of fun. But eventually his wild slashing did drive her all the way up to second floor, where the rooms were narrower than the now devastated foyer. A labyrinthine web of libraries and bedrooms and baths and lounges. Not a lot of room to swing an eight foot long polearm. That might actually make things a little interesting, come to think of it.

Inevitably it happened. Nonon miscalculated a swing, intended for an opening on Akiari's head, and realized it was going to hit a door frame too late. She was sure that, when it rebounded that would leave her vulnerable for just a moment, and as Akiari loomed over her she didn't know exactly how she'd get out of the way in time. But when it collided the black blade just kept on going as though the wood weren't even there, showering everything with splinters. *Oh right. We're really fucking strong.*

*[We could use this to our advantage, you know]* Nonon instantly understood what he was suggesting, and giggled at the idea. Saiban had noticed something very interesting about the wood splinters

“Alright, enough of this. Later!” She shouted.

“What?” Akiari responded, but it was already too late. Nonon vanished in a blur, diving into a closet, through the wall, and out of sight on the other side. It was genius. She knew exactly where he was from his scent, but he had no idea where she’d gone in the maze. Saiban sensed him rushing out into the hallway, no doubt looking around desperately. Now she could evade him and carry on looking for the secret entrance. But first...

A flurry of stabs sprung from the hallway wall as Nonon’s naginata sang effortlessly through wood, pipes, wires, and wallpaper. Not a one hit Akiari, but they stuck out all around him, causing him to stagger as he was blinded by the spray. Just what Saiban had foreseen. When the wood splinters flew plenty of them deflected off the *huskarl*’s energy field, but the slower ones - they sailed right through!

And now Nonon joined them, lunging forward with all her speed and great huff of steam. But when her hand extended, it was slow and steady, like a child trying to catch a frog. Akiari didn’t appreciate the danger he was in, and – success! How could there be any energy to reflect when her hand had hardly been moving at all, when he’d practically walked into it? Her fingers seized on one of those unfurled plates, and with an almighty twist:

“AAAWGH!” Akiari howled in pain and rage as the plate crumpled and sparked in Nonon’s hand, trailing glowing fibers. The plate had taken with it a great stretch of the Ultima Uniform’s fabric, and it seemed the fibers had hooked themselves into him, because he was bleeding profusely from a gash along his ribs. Holding it high in one hand she brought the naginata’s blade down on the fibers, severing them with a *pop!* More sparks shot up around Akiari, and his body jerked and spasmed.

This time, Nonon didn’t hesitate or slow down. Propping herself up on tail and polearm, she extended her legs gingerly, wrapping them around his neck. She spun her now horizontal body all the way around in an instant, slamming Akiari into the ground with such a force that they both fell through the floor and every window in the mansion shattered.

His helmet popped off, and Nonon got a glimpse of panic-stricken eyes. But her blade was already descending, right towards the new gap in his invisible armor.

**“Sen-I-Soshitsu!”**

Blood splattered onto the marble. Akiari gave one spasm and went still.

*Whoa.*

*[Whoa.]* Nonon and Saiban both thought at once. The shock wobbling through the naginata as it sliced sinew and muscle, every little irregularity in the gristle and cracking bone echoing into their fingers, it was *so* incredible. They’d done it. Their first victory. And just in time too, for Saiban smelled a massive burst of activity headed their way. Like a

stirring hive of bees. On the plus side, she could tell exactly where they were leaving the base from. Some of them were peeling off into the forest, clearly after Ryuko, but Nonon wasn't much in the mood to warn her

“Seems like a pretty big design flaw you've got there huh?” Nonon asked nobody in particular, grinning face flush.

~ “Nonon. Nonon! He's dead.” ~ Came Satsuki's voice. *Well shit.*

“Well shit.” Nonon looked down for the first time. Unseeing eyes met hers. A peculiar coldness passed through her, but it was Saiban's not hers. She'd gotten over that feeling years ago.

*[We didn't mean to. Tell them that. Go on!]* Humans were still a bit unusual to him, but seeing this lifeless flesh that used to be one... Hard to believe, but that thing had been *like him*. Thoughts, feelings, dreams – maybe not even bad ones. Not anymore though.

“Yeah I'm sorry, I know we're supposed to capture them. Shit Ryuko, how'd you always do sen-i-soshitsu without killing anyone? Like, slicing right along their skin without hitting it is really hard.”

~ “Honestly Senketsu took over for that at first, then it just became muscle memory” ~ Ryuko chimed in.

*[I don't know how to do that.]*

“Then I guess we'll have to learn together, huh?”

~ “Hey, I see a bunch of dudes headed my way. That my problem?” ~ Ryuko asked.

“I would assume so.”

~ “Neato, I get somethin' to do.” ~

~ “Nonon, are you ready to proceed?” ~ Satsuki asked, getting her back on track. It was unfortunate, but this was an eventuality they had all accepted could happen. She'd make up for it next time.

“Yeah, sure. I've wasted enough time already,” Nonon pulled her blade from Akiari's corpse and was about to head out when, as Saiban's senses had warned, about thirty men and women in glossy white and magenta uniforms rounded the corner into the foyer at superhuman speeds. Like the 2-star Ultima uniform they left the great extent of the stomach and back open, like extraordinarily flimsy leotards, complete with glowing tights and long purple wires connecting gloves and gauntlets with the epaulettes that sat upon their shoulders. When they saw that their leader was already a corpse, they stopped dead in their tracks.

“Hold on one sec, the one-stars are here, shouldn't take long,” Nonon reset her foot position, gave a “come on then” wave with her free hand. “Alright fellas, who's first?”

~~~~~

No. No no no no no! Minazuki didn't want to believe it, but she couldn't unsee it. The security cameras told her everything. That little bitch – who cared if it was the Kamui or the human in control – she didn't bother with mercy, did she? Despair settled onto her like a blanket of needles. Her best friend – her only friend – and he could've been so much more. There was no reason to stay here any longer. No reason to leave anything intact. She pressed the on button on the intercom one last time.

“Release Chibi and the wolf-rats, and get out of here!”

~ “At once, my Lady!” ~ The voice on the other end rang, and she smiled grimly. Now she could go. Even if Satsuki's minions pounding at the door wound up winning anyway, she was sure this last secret weapon would still give them pause. Last one out – hit the lights.

In a pitch-black concrete chamber deep in the bases recesses, a magnetic containment field shut down with a whirring noise. Claws scraped the in the darkness, gouging the concrete with hideous screeching. There was nobody around to hear it. A great feathered head shook, and bloodshot eyes the size of dinner plates shot open. Their bearer lifted its frame up as high as it could go, effortlessly shoving the ceiling aside, and began its climb to the scents above.

~~~~~

Nonon used the one-stars to practice her sen-i-soshitsu, and it went swimmingly. At first she had to aim for extremities, still failing to contain her strength, and loose arms and legs scattered the mansion's rubble. But by the tenth or so she had it down and started raking the naginata right along their backs, bursting uniforms into loose, drifting life fibers that Saiban happily slurped up.

This part was fun, demolishing a host of enemies, each with a single slash. She danced the way she had practiced in all her bouts with Ryuko, Satuski, Tsumugu, and Uzu. A little bundle of speeding, spiky green and gold that was simply beyond any one-star's ability to strike. To their credit, only two tried to run, even as they watched their comrades get torn apart without even coming close to landing a blow. She was almost disappointed it was over when the last one toppled over, naked and unconscious. But enough time had been wasted already.

*[Something new coming. This one's really big.]*

“Ugh, again?” Nonon felt it too. “Wait, why is this one coming straight up?”

Then the front half of the mansion exploded.

Finally part of this set tomorrow. Is it okay that I keep splitting these? I'd really like to know if you'd rather I just wait until the whole thing is done, makes me feel a bit bad maybe getting everyone's hopes up who's waiting for the Satsuryu and other non-action stuff. Also, let me know how my action writing is, because this stuff is tricky and I really want to improve.

Update: it has now been two days since I claimed the last part would be up tomorrow and I'm still working on it. But I promise - it will be up today, just a little later.



# Nonon's Prize

## Chapter Summary

The final installment of the Nonon gets her Kamui arc! It's a pretty long blow by blow, but don't skip it - or at least the turning point. Future combat scenes won't be this long and detailed, it's just cuz this one's the first. So if it bores you, won't be a problem again

## Chapter Notes

Yeah I know it's late, gimme a break.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

From a perch high up in a tree Ryuko had a great vantage down onto the Otori Mansion. She watched Nonon and Saiban bounce across the gardens, watched their fight against Akiari though the wide windows, watched the one-star soldiers pour out and surround them.

And yeah, she did kind of wish it was her down there. The blow-by-blow was easy enough for her to follow with her super-senses that she quickly deduced how Akiari's uniform worked and had worked out her own plan for how to beat it – pin him down with rubble like a giant clam and then figure out how to crack him at her leisure – and when Nonon didn't try this she itched to jump in there and take care of it herself. But that was stupid, Nonon would be furious, and more importantly then she'd have to take responsibility for what happened next. She'd have to get involved again. Better to let Nonon prove her help wasn't needed anymore – that her power was enough to take care of things. Nonon was okay with signing herself away as a soldier again for however long it took to defeat REVOCS – made sense, considering she got Saiban out the bargain – but as far as Ryuko was concerned: *yeah, fuck that noise. Those days are behind me.* But still, an opponent that could fight back...

So Ryuko was actually fairly excited when she saw the one-stars sallying out to hunt her. It wouldn't hurt any if she had them to keep her busy. She dropped from her tree, padding across the forest floor. *C'mon, come get me you weirdos.* She could've probably charged them full speed, but odds are that would be too fast for them to react - which didn't bode well for their ability to put up a fight, but she'd cross that bridge when she got there. Better to let them think she hadn't spotted them yet, that she was just chilling in the woods, admiring the bare bark and the withered brown leaves. She could hear them, they were probably just about to crest the valley's rim into her light of sight, when:

*Get down!* A distortion in the air screamed at her. Ryuko dropped, crouching low into the scraggly underbrush, and in an instant several high caliber bullets slammed by right where her head had been. There was something odd about them, Ryuko could sense an aura from them (her range was nowhere near as far as Saiban's, maybe a few feet around her), and when she looked up she caught a glimpse of a red glow. And then there was the surprised look she now saw on the soldier's faces, barely visible between the rise and the dull grey of their rifle scopes. *They really expected that to work, didn't they?* She remembered with a chill that they knew her weakness.

"Probably best those didn't hit me. Hey what was that about? Felt like there were life-fibers in those bullets," She asked the earpiece.

~ "One moment, still interpreting the scans," ~ Houka responded unhelpfully. ~ "Er, keep staying out of their way for now, don't let them fire again if you can." ~

"Already on it!" Ryuko was on top of her assailants in a flash. They really never had a chance. The first man she darted up on was so shocked when she appeared in front of him that he leapt up, throwing his rifle aside with a yelp.

"Oh shi-," The next one over tried to bring his barrel around, as if that would do any good. She twinkled it out of his grasp and crumped the gun between her fingertips as he looked on in dismay.

"Alright, enough of that," Ryuko stood with her fists on her hips, slouching just slightly the way she tended to keep loose before a fight. The one-stars, ten men and women in those glossy leotards. Now that she had a chance to look at them, Ryuko was less than impressed. Eppaulettes, big heavy gauntlets, wires, the skimpy bodices? What a bizarre mishmash, not at all complemented by the white and magenta color. Who had designed these things? Frankly, and she didn't like to admit it, even Nui had had better fashion sense than this. But they were supposed to be stronger than the one-star Goku Uniforms. Time to see just how much.

The soldiers stood there for a moment, paralyzed by the realization that they couldn't escape her now. Like watching a tiger, waiting to see what it would do.

"Well, c'mon! I'll let you get the first hit. Show me what you got!" This was apparently too much for the man whose gun she'd crushed. After a moment to psych himself up he lunged at her, driving his fist into her gut with a wordless grunt.

It didn't even hurt. He looked up, panic stricken, and Ryuko lifted an arm lazily. She sighed, "Not impressed. I'm not gonna toy with you though, don't worry."

A single flick to his forehead sent him tumbling, unconscious, through the leaves and fallen branches. The moment her finger connected she could feel the life-fibers loosening, so she grabbed them with her invisible third hand. They stayed behind in a big red tangle as his naked body flopped, and she slurped them up. One of the other soldiers gave up and ran. The others either prepared to try and shoot her at point blank range or readied for a doomed fistfight.

That was when a deafening crash echoed through the forest and Ryuko saw a great column of dust shoot up from the mansion. Satsuki immediately began calling through the earpiece, demanding to know if Nonon was alright. It looked like her help would be needed, after all.

~~~~~

~ “Nonon? Nonon! Sound off!” ~

“Dirty trick,” Nonon said, peering through the dust that cloyed around her. It was impossible to see anything more than a few feet away, but Saiban *smelled* something way to close for comfort. “Yeah, I’m fine, but what was –,”

[*Look Out!*] Saiban shouted into her head, but even though she leapt back ten feet it didn’t matter.

“Wha – ough!” Something huge swiped through the fog, catching Nonon right on the shoulders and hurling her in a long arc through the air. She splintered the still-standing fragment of a wall on her way out, tumbling on the lawn until she was nearly clear of the fog. When she pulled herself to her feet, it was with a gaping open mouth. Two immense, jagged, black objects rose three, four, no, *five* stories high out of the dust cloud. A great keening noise resonated from within. Monstrous feathered wings.

~ “My god...” ~

“Uhh guys! They have a *dragon!*” Nonon shouted over the keening as a great head reared its way through. Somewhere between the size of a refrigerator and a small car, with a beak lined by hooked serrations and a crest of ragged black feathers, its eyes were huge and blank. Behind it, an s-curved neck stretched down to a body likewise covered in pitch, oily feathers and long, crisscrossing scars.

~ “Well, it’s actually a hybrid beast created from an eagle,” ~ Shiro corrected her.

“I think I know a dragon when I see one!”

~ “Isn’t it more like a griffon?” ~ Houka asked.

~ “Maybe a wyvern.” ~

“Holy shit you guys!” Nonon said, backpedaling as the creature stalked towards her and she fully appreciate the size of it. It curled its wings up, walking on hind legs with talons not all that much shorter than Nonon’s entire body. She could barely wrap her head around such an impenetrable living wall. Her eyes bugged out and she emitted a nervous chuckle.

~ “Shiro, Houka! Clear the chatter!” ~ Satsuki called, reining them in. ~ “Nonon, can you kill it?” ~

“Wear it down or hit it with a cross-cut, right?” Nonon shouting, remembering the briefing as the beak fell like an executioner’s axe – this was what had hit her earlier. She skirted out of the way as it kicked up a fountain of earth, keening all the while. What a horrid

noise, filling the ears and screaming to Nonon that this was a desperate creature. Best to try and put it out of its misery, then. She twirled her naginata into its exposed throat, but suddenly it was moving again, dragging its beak along the ground in a shuddering, jerky arc. Nonon's eyes lit up with panic and she reflexively raised a free hand to block it, and to her surprise as her fingers met the rumpled, horny surface of the beak they ground to a halt. She'd forgotten her own strength again! "I can do it."

~ "Good luck." ~ that was the last thing Nonon heard clearly as the booming calls of the monster filled her ears. The great beak rose from the ground and just as quickly came back down; she dodged the first and the second but the furious pounding caught up to her on the third swing, and she had to hold up her arms above her head to catch it, crouching low and even then being shoved a few inches into the roiling mud. Frozen for a moment, she pushed off and forced the great head of the thing that had once been an eagle back off her, and it stumbled back with much rustling of mangy feathers.

[Nonon this being is very powerful] Saiban warned, feeling her same fear but also the same begrudging acceptance. This needed to be done *[I can only protect you against so many blows like that before I have to shut down.]*

"Got it! In that case then we'll go full evasion mode," Nonon landed cleanly in the driveway and darted back in. This time she ignored the beak, hurtling under the dragon's rotund belly to attack those pillar-legs. It stomped and backpedaled, trying to get her back into sight, but she was nimble enough to avoid the talons and eventually she got her chance, digging a blade deep into the scaly ankle. She was rewarded with a sudden, jerky recoil and a huge, violent explosion of hyper-pressurized blood. But all too soon it sealed up, wound closing as if it had never been there. She would have to do that over and over again to overwhelm its healing. But that was fine. Just think of what a fantastic feat it would be to bring this thing down!

Eventually, after quite a few other lightning quick cuts Nonon did manage to dislodge a toe. It wasn't as easy as she might have hoped – the hybrid eagle was unearthly fast, her only advantage was that so long as she stayed underneath it only she could see what she was doing. But when she watched the toe pop off, she was dismayed to see the flesh begin to writhe and pulsate and, sure enough, resculpt itself into a new toe, talon and all.

"Oh son of a...," Nonon said as she watched it happen. *So much for wearing it down.* But then something shifted above her. She looked up to see the foul creature's underbelly falling towards her. It had given up on stomping her and decided to just sit on her. "*OH SON OF A BI-*,"

Pressed into the earth by the body of the hybrid eagle, Nonon didn't hear the great thud it made as it crunched down. She did hear Satsuki and Uzu desperately yelling for her. But she couldn't answer, couldn't open her mouth or she would surely gag from the putrid, acrid, greasy stench percolating off the rotting skin behind the feathers. At least she wasn't suffocating – she'd had just enough time to raise her naginata above her head, creating a sort of tent for her to crouch in. But the wound couldn't heal while the blade was still in it. The shower of scalding metallic fluid covered her whole body, but far from being soothing it inspired an entirely new panic. Her tent was filling up. Nonon could feel her heart racing.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon,

[C'mon, c'mon, c'mon] Nonon and Saiban both knew there was only one thing to do: unlatch the two halves of the naginata – *click* – she managed it, and bring the two blades together in the hybrid's flesh. With all the strength she could muster, Nonon dragged the lower blade right up alongside the first until she could feel them scraping together and opened her arms, pulling them apart with a scissoring motion. Even in her fleshy tent she could feel the shockwave resonate through its body, hear its howl of pain.

“Haha!” Nonon shouted as light flooded back in, hybrid lifting off her. She rolled free and tried to shake the blood off as best she could, but it wasn't doing much good. Saiban's surface appeared to be hydrophobic, but her hair wasn't so lucky. Somehow it stayed up, but it was now several shades darker. “I'm still here guys,” she told the earpiece, “Don't freak out.”

~ “Looks like that did some permanent damage,” ~ Aikuro observed. The fresh gash on the monster's belly continued to spout blood at an absurd rate – the life-fibers were severed, it wasn't sealing back up. A few more of those and might be enough to bring it down. But it wouldn't be so easy – the hybrid eagle was enraged now, charging right for Nonon, mouth wide open, lower jaw scraping along the ground. It had realized that she was a legitimate threat now, not food, and now she had to die

“EEEEK!” Nonon couldn't help but fall back in the face of that horrifying maw. It kept advancing, chasing her over hedgerows, topiaries, and tennis courts until she'd been forced back into the forest.

[This could be good. We have the maneuverability advan – oh] Saiban said as they watched the hybrid blast right through a towering old oak, carving a path into the dry woods with its enormous bulk. At least it had to close its mouth to avoid eating a tree.

It didn't take long for Nonon to lose track of time. It could've been seconds, minutes, hours, it didn't matter. She could hear talking in her ear, but with the blood rushing she had little idea what they were saying. All there was in the world was the hybrid, the forest, Saiban, and herself. Everything was sucked into the intense focus it took to try and land another cross-cut on the hybrid. Each time she got close it glanced off wrong, or she couldn't land both blades at once, and each time she would take a hit and her frustration would grow. *I know Satsuki*, she wanted to yell into the earpiece, *I know this is taking too long! Just one more try – this time it'll work!*

She swerved between the trees, leaping in to plunge the blade in her left hand deep into its thigh. *Good, good – what the fuck!* A gigantic kick lashed through the air and she, feet already off the ground, was along for the ride. Try as she might there was no way to get her right hand there in time – she slid loose and went tumbling, splintering trees as they went, until suddenly the canopy above gave way to overcast sky. She skidded onto asphalt, leaping backup and staring around in confusion at her new environment. Why were there voices, human scents all around?

Nonon saw now that she had been thrown into a measly, one road village. Low wooden homes surrounded her, as did the nervous faces of the villagers – mostly people who had fled

the cities in the hard times before the COVERS war, but also a few families whose ancestors had lived in the area. They'd heard the noise from the fight, seen the dust rising from the mansion, and now they crowded around to see the source of the disturbance. Nonon wasted no time wondering what she might have looked like to them, not when she could feel the monster fast approaching.

“Get out of here, *RUN!*” She shouted as the forest heaved and her enemy burst forth, a trundling black mass like a scar on the surrounding nature. The villagers didn't need to be told twice, and they ran screaming in every direction. Nonon wasn't sure if they were all out of the way in time, but really it didn't matter. If she didn't get between them, none of them would be safe. The hybrid was still focused on her – thank god. As it charged forward she leapt up as high as she could. Attacking from the ground wasn't working, so this time they would go in from the air.

~ “We can't afford to delay any longer. Ryuko! Head down into the base and recover any assets you can.” ~ Satsuki's voice cut in, and Nonon immediately forgot what she was doing. *Wait, what?*

“Uff!” A wing swipe knocked her out of the sky. It *hurt* that time. Really hurt, not just registry of the attack but real pain leaking through the energy field. Not good. She got up hesitantly, her frustration billowing. Ryuko was going to complete the mission? That was the last straw. “No no what the fuck guys? This is my op! I'm going to get the book, just as soon as I kill this – Awgh!”

A brutal sideswipe from the beak crashed right through her – she'd been distracted. That one really hurt, Nonon could feel her side pulsating with it. Saiban was at a loss, his panic was growing stronger, mingling with her own rage.

[Nonon I have maybe one more hit I can protect us from! After that it could kill us! Nonon we need to think of something!]

“Yeah I know!” Nonon whispered, crouching low in the rubble. She could hear and feel the hybrid eagle stalking closer – it must not have spotted exactly where she went yet. “Geez is all you do nag me?”

[I thought you didn't want me to try to talk!]

~ “Nonon, Nonon are you alright?” ~

“Satsuki, I-I'm sorry, I don't think I can do it,” Nonon was at her wits end. She'd tried so many times and only once had she actually managed to leave a mark on this thing! She couldn't even handle an animal!

~ “Just hang in there, we'll send Ryuko down as soon as -” ~

“No!” It wasn't fair. Even now she was still living in her goddamn shadow!

[Nonon we can't stay here! Please, move!]

Nonon prepared to stand up. She might not have the energy left to fight, but she would still be able to run. Run? The humiliation crushed her. But what was there left to do? She had let down Satsuki, Uzu, Saiban, everyone. She might as well just die, if that didn't mean Saiban would die too.

"I'm sorry," She whispered to the villagers screaming in the distance, "You're on your own."

~~~~~

"Are you sure?" Ryuko asked, sitting next to the neat row of naked, unconscious REVOCS soldiers she'd made on the forest floor? "Shouldn't I go help Nonon instead?"

~ "We're running out of time as it is," ~ Satsuki informed her bluntly.

~ "Satsuki, I-I'm sorry, I don't think I can do it." ~

"Oh shit, she sounds fucked up."

~ "Just hang in there, we'll send Ryuko down as soon as -" ~

~ "No!" ~

~ "Ryuko please, finish this quickly," ~ Back in the control room, grim faces abounded. Things hung on the precipice of disaster. But Satsuki wasn't flinching. She'd known Nonon longer than any of them. She was tougher than this. ~ Nonon will find a way. I'm letting Shiro take over your line." ~ Satsuki cut out, to be replaced by Shiro clearing his throat.

"Alright then," Ryuko had heard Nonon's protests, and frankly was worried she was in over her head, but Satsuki had a point. This whole mission wouldn't count for much if they didn't get something valuable from it. "Hey Shiro, let's go get us a book, eh?"

She dashed down to what was left of the mansion. Fortunately for her there would be no wasting time trying to find a hidden entrance – a vast circular sinkhole open up into darkness now, giant claw marks on the sides indicated where the hybrid eagle had tunneled through. Ryuko leapt into the darkness, plunging stories down to a wide-open concrete room that could only have been the monster's holding chamber. All was quiet, the only lights were what filtered in from above and the dim reds of emergency exit signs. Not like that mattered much to Ryuko, she could see quite clearly even in the darkness. Not knowing where else to go, Ryuko settled for busting the glass of the observation chamber and jogging off down the adjoining hallway, pitch black settling around her.

~ "Our cameras are quite poor in low light, so you'll have to look out for yourself. If you have any questions just ask," ~ Shiro said helpfully. ~ "Make sure you keep an eye out for traps. Good luck." ~

"Don't worry, I'll be as cautious as can be," Ryuko said, scanning with all her senses as far as they would go. Each turn and corner in the darkened halls looked like the others, but fortunately when she felt lost, she could just burst through a few walls and be

back on track. So far there were no signs of life, but her hyper-sensitive hearing was picking up stuff from above. Shouting, footsteps and scrabbling noises, chittering. There was definitely something down there with her.

~~~~~

[I know there's slim odds, but if we run these humans will certainly die.] Saiban's voice cut through the footfalls and the keening [I don't want to run, and I know you don't either]

I can't win, and Ryuko already got the prize. Why bother?

[Nonon our prize is right here! You know a book is nothing compared to this!]

~ "Let me talk to her, c'mon!" ~

~ "You're already on" ~ Satsuki said quickly

"Uzu?"

~ "Nonon? Can you hear me?" ~

"Yeah," She smiled despite herself. He was so obviously worried, it was nice sometimes that he wore his heart on his sleeve. He couldn't possibly be disappointed in her for failing, not when all he wanted was for her to come home. "Yeah, I can."

~ "I know it looks tough Nonon, but we're counting on you here. You're going to get up, and you're going to beat that thing." ~

"But - ,"

~ "No, I don't wanna hear any of that!" ~ *Oh. He would be disappointed, wouldn't he?* ~ "You're gonna win this thing, and you know how I know? Not because you're one of the Elite Four, not because I believe in you, or any of that crap. You remember what you told me? You promised that you would be better than Satsuki, even better than Ryuko, the best." ~ Normally she would've been mortified to have that said in front of Satsuki, but it didn't matter now. She thought back to the Nonon who'd said those words. What would she say if she saw her now? Had she worked so hard just to give up now? ~ "You know when I blinded myself, I woke up every morning and thought to myself 'This is it – my story starts today'. Nonon, your story starts *today*. You're at your best when you fight with that smug, bitchy little smile on your face – show 'em why." ~

Logically, it wasn't much. Tripe, one step above nonsense. But it was exactly what she needed to hear.

~ "C'mon Nonon, don't make me look like a dick here" ~ She could imagine exactly how he was smiling as he said that.

Nonon will find a way.

If we run, these humans will certainly die.

Nonon, your story starts today.

Consider this your second lesson: Get the fuck back up.

Our prize is right here!

They were right. A shadow loomed over her. The keening stopped. It had found her. But now an incandescent mixture of hope and rage was brimming in her. Fuck it. If she died now her troubles were over. But she wouldn't die now.

For the briefest instant, a peculiar sensation flooded through her. It was as though, rather than containing her body, Saiban let it flow through him like water through a strainer. It was like she was floating up to meet the hybrid beast's descending jaws. She just had to smack it, as hard as she could. So she did.

With a rush of wind so powerful it boomed across the mountains, everything in a fifty-yard radius was forcibly evicted. Half the village went from sturdy little wooden houses to loose boards and nails rocketing through the air. It happened so fast it was like stop motion. Even the hybrid eagle skidded away, holding its ground only with beating wings and latched claws. Nonon was standing again. The pain wasn't gone – it would remain as a reminder to do better this time. But that didn't mean her arms were stiff at all.

~ “Amazing!” ~ Houka exclaimed ~ “Saiban is capable of the ‘willpower blast’ effect like Senketsu and Junketsu!” ~

~ “No, that's not Saiban.” ~ Aikuro said ~ “That's Nonon.” ~

“I've got to hand it to you Uzu,” Nonon said, just as smugly as ever, “You may not be the brains of the operation, but you know fighting, and you know not giving a shit about the odds. But you are gonna pay for calling me a bitch just then.”

[We're going to fight?]

“We're going to fight. And we're going to win,” She clicked her naginata back together. To hell with cross-cutting, she was better with it this way.

She didn't waste any time, didn't acknowledge Uzu's last cry of encouragement. The hybrid was stunned for a moment by the blast, and that was time she used to leap, pushing off with her tail, naginata held in front of her like a lance, not in an arc but in a straight line right for its head. The blade dug in down to the hilt with a crunch of bone. The hybrid howled in pain as the blood ran free. A wing swiped down to dislodge her, but she was already moving again, swinging down off the side of its face to bouncing off the ground, slicing the great staring eye on the way. Then it was up to the armpit, a deep stab into the soft flesh, then off elsewhere.

None of these blows would leave any lasting damage but trying for that hadn't worked. So fuck it. She dove in with no plan but plentiful enthusiasm, for the first time in the fight one

step ahead of it's attacks – not dodging but just *not there*. And every time she scored a hit it only made the hybrid more confused and more furious. Saiban had no objections to this reckless plan of attack – this was how a Kamui was meant to fight, Nonon understood it now. No thought, pure instinct, and in this state her mind conjured up memories and sensations like a dream, sifting through them with Saiban. It was an wordless form of conversation, and somehow didn't distract her at all.

The hybrid, on the other hand, was not faring well. Its poor, addled brain couldn't keep up with a creature with such tenacity. It was time to leave. It extended its wings, all one hundred feet of them, with a gust of wind powerful enough to knock Nonon back. A momentary pause, *is it doing what a think it is?* And suddenly, inexplicably, it leapt into the air.

[That thing can fly?]

~ “That thing can fly?” ~

“Hoholy shit that thing can fly!” Nonon charged back at it. Although it had achieved some for of levitation based liftoff without a running start, it took some time for it to rise more than fifty or so feet above the ground, where it hung like a great feathery blimp.

[Let's not let it get away now!]

“We're hitching a ride!” Nonon declared, separating her naginata again as she charged it. Saiban fired up his vents, jetting golden flames to boost Nonon faster than ever. Reaching its talons was no problem, sinking her blades in like meathooks even easier. The moment it felt her latch on the hybrid experienced, for the first time, genuine panic. It started moving forward with a lurch and wingbeats seemed far too slow to support it.

Nonon, meanwhile, began her ascent. One blade at a time she scurried up its leg, but not fast enough. The trees were fast approaching and if she wasn't careful, she'd be scraped off. But fuck being careful, it hadn't worked before. She was equal in strength to it, right? So why not try throwing her weight around a little? She swung herself off one of her blades like she was hanging from monkey bars, and kicked the beast's thigh with all her might. It did the trick, the shockwave of the impact reverberated through its body and tilted it into a tight corkscrew, much, much closer to the ground than it could withstand. The moment its wingtip clipped the ground, nearly a third of the wing was shorn off in a bloody explosion.

But somehow that still wasn't enough. Now the hybrid began to climb, first 45 degrees up and then nearly 90, until Nonon could see the mansion, the village, even a distant town all like tiny models. It defied reason that this creature could fly at all, let alone with such incredible damage, but Nonon wasted no time wondering what the life-fibers were doing to make it so.

Up the length of the creature's belly she climbed, braving bucking and twisting and vicious clawing as she went. So close now, so fucking close. The air was growing thin and murderously cold, so much so she almost couldn't bear it. But inevitably she made it, right below the base of the hybrids long neck. She gave its chest another swinging kick, this one right into an already open wound so her feet stuck there, preventing it from closing. Now she

had her chance. He blades were free, its windpipe right there. She didn't bother yelling sen-i-soshitsu this time.

With one final fountain of blood, the hybrid went still. It didn't even manage a last squawk as its windpipe was severed. Asphyxiation was quick after that – this was a creature that should not have been capable of breathing at all, so having its monstrous anatomy ruined lead to its lungs going limp like week-old balloons. The fearsome lurch as it began to fall came at the exact same time that Nonon realized it was over. Nothing left to do now but twist it so it was falling on its back and pray that it would be enough to break the fall. It was a big animal, it would resist the shock, right?

Nonon fell without a scream, but the landing was another story. The force of the blow crumpled a hillside. “*Aieeeee!*” Nonon screamed as she was thrown from the tumbling carcass, shutting her eyes against the rubble flying all around. This time, she skidded to a halt in a bed of soft, if damp, leaves.

“Getting real sick of being tossed around.”

[Aand that fall reached my limit. I only hope that was enough to stop it for good] Saiban said as he powered down.

“Only one way to find out,” Nonon said as they got up, “Ohoho wow.”

There it was, feet twitching, eyes unseeing, puffy tongue lolling. Dead as it could be. Nonon breathed a sigh of relief that released more air than she thought her lungs could even hold. The elation seized both her and Saiban, making her feel dizzy.

“We did it! We-did-it-we-did-it-we-did-it-we-,”

~ “Amazing work Nonon. You are the first person – ever – to defeat a hybrid beast in battle,” ~ Satsuki informed her, correctly guessing that she would be interested. Besides her voice she could hear cheering and laughter on the other end of the line.

“WOW,” Was all Nonon had to say. She slumped down against her trophy. Without Saiban powered up, it suddenly felt very cold. But she wasn't about to leave her prize now, not just yet. Saiban had begun to drink the life fibers from its unhealed wound. Just a little longer, and she would have her lunch too. *I feel like I could eat this whole stupid bird myself.*

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A vast vibration shook through the hallways, and Ryuko stopped in her tracks, “Yo Shiro, what was that?”

~ “Nonon just defeated the hybrid beast she was fighting. She's fine, resting.” ~

“Neat.”

~ “Any luck?” ~

“Still looking and – hellooo!” Ryuko had spotted a room with a light still on. A spotlight, and in the middle of it was a plinth with a book “Nevermind, I’ve got it.”

~ “You do? Really?” ~ Shiro breathed a sigh of relief, ~ “I thought we’d missed our chance” ~

“Yeah well, they seem to have left in a hurry,” Ryuko said, darting in at lightning speed just in case there was a trap on the way. She bashed through the glass doors in her usual manner, entering into a sort of small chapel. Nothing about was really all too special about it, except:

“Oh! ...Ugh...” Behind the altar there stood a massive ivory statue of a woman. With those fox-ears in her hair, there was no mistaking it. Ragyo. Ryuko shuddered as she walked over it. Not failing to notice that she had to step over a dead body to do so.

“Fucking freaks,” she said, holding a hand out to statue. With a light slap, she pulverized it. “Hey, found another dead guy in here. Looks like a priest in their fucked-up cult. He’s pretty torn up.”

~ “Hmm, most likely there’s another hybrid beast of some type running around in here, preying on the stragglers.” ~ Shiro didn’t seem all that interested, ~ “But the book, the book is intact?” ~

“Yeah hold on,” Ryuko lifted it up, cradling the thick leather tome as she read the cover, “*La Chanson de la Couturière?* This is it alright.” She opened it up and started paging through it. It had the same super thin, gold lined pages bibles and the like had. “Hey, hold up. This is all jibberish dude.”

~ “Jibberish?” ~

“Yeah, it doesn’t say anything,” Page after page was covered in nonsense scribbling and odd, inscrutable blueprints, “These aren’t even Kanji, I don’t think they’re any language. Oh hold on,” It clicked to Ryuko suddenly, she was dumb, but not that dumb, “Ohhh yeah dude this is all in code.”

Shiro groaned ~ “Code?” ~

“Hey man, aren’t you guys geniuses? I’m sure you can crack it.”

~ “Sure, but that’s not the point” ~

~ “You got it?” ~ Houka suddenly joined in.

~ “Yes, but it’s all in code.” ~

~ “Code?” ~ He groaned too, ~ “Ugh, goodbye weekends.” ~

~ “I knoww.” ~

“Hey guys?” Ryuko interrupted, “Can you see this? I don’t think you’re gonna like it.” She held a page close to her face to make sure the camera got it. Most of the blueprints she couldn’t parse, but these, these were all too familiar. Kamui. Four of them.

~ “Oh dear, no that’s not good at all,” ~ Shiro commented, then paused. The chittering was back. ~ “You hear that?” ~

“Oh yeah. One moment, looks like the other critters have decided to show up,” Ryuko ran back out into the hallway, tracked down the noise, and before long was acquainted with the wolf-rats, those same pack hunting hybrids that Shiro had kept a pack of in their lab for a while. Another disappointing fight – she could overwhelm their healing ability with a single punch. As Ryuko stood there, book still in hand, in the corridor now painted with the red sludge that was all that was left of them, with Shiro piping in her ear that it was a mercy, really, to put such tortured creatures down, she wondered why she cared so much about having a fair fight that this disappointed her. She still took their life-fibers though.

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“I don’t even give a shit – I’m getting that thing’s skull cleaned and I’m mounting it on my mantelpiece. If I have to extend the ceiling for it to fit, so be it,” Nonon said casually. She and Ryuko had found the life-fiber storage pods in the REVOCS base and they were sitting in comfy chairs from the command center, fibers trailing from them as they set to work absorbing it all. Nothing better to do while the conventional military cleaned up the rest of the mess. It also helped Saiban recharge faster after the day’s exertions.

“Hell yeah, go for it. You earned that much. I didn’t even know those hybrid beasts existed and when I saw that I was – just, blown away, you know?”

“Oh, I definitely do. I was – literally – blown away, multiple times, if you’ll recall.”

“Heh. But shit, I wish I got to see the whole thing.”

“Next time. And there probably will be a next time.”

“Next time ideally we’ll see it coming better.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Saiban had just finished his pod, “Hey, wanna crack us open another?”

“You got it!” Ryuko leapt up, took the next pod from Saiban’s half of the room and wrenched the top off. “Oh, by the way, you ever pick a name for your sickass spear thing?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m thinking *Kiba* - Fang.”

“Boy, really leaning into the whole snake theme, huh?”

“So what if I am?” Nonon would normally have said that in a much more hostile tone. But she was in an unremittantly good mood right now, and so was Saiban. Tonight, she would get to sleep in her silk sheets, Uzu at her side, Saiban right next to her (or maybe even

on her). It was a great day. And then tomorrow Saiban would finally get to see the world. Even better. “Besides, it was my thing first, before Houka started playing with it.”

“Snake, Dog, Monkey, Toad, Spider, right? Not exactly the most regal animals. Satsuki have her own animal?”

“Nah, it’s only for us elites. Although if I had to choose...,”

“Eagle.”

“I was thinking tiger.”

“Nah, the way she always stood on her tower and stared at you? Eagle all the way.”

“Well whatever, it’s the same energy.”

“Yeah, whatever. Well then, to *Kiba*?” Ryuko made a motion like she was holding a drink up for a toast.

“To *Kiba*!” Nonon grinned despite herself as she mimicked the motion.

[To Kiba!]

Maybe one day you’ll be as famous as the scissors, Nonon thought, fiddling with the tiny blade – back in its spot pinning up her hair. *I honestly kinda doubt it, but man, man I hope so.*

Chapter End Notes

For anyone curious, I have outlined ten more chapters for part 1. These may, and probably will, sometimes be split into sub-chapters. I will try to keep the word counts down, but some (especially the finale) are just gonna need to be a little long. Then after that we're on to part 2, which I will probably make into a seperate work because by that point part 1 will be like 40-50 chapters long.

Anyway as always feedback is much appreciated, I'm committed to making this as good as possible so I will no doubt respond to any comments with more detail than you were expecting!

In which peace is relative

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 2066

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“Yeah, I mean it’s just a little trick Mako and I would use to keep our stuff from getting swiped – just a larger scale. Used it when I was on my own with the scissor-blade guitar case too. Made the lining for that myself, I did.” Ryuko said as she followed Rei – who followed their waiter – through a crowded, upscale restaurant. Rei turned back to her with a smile.

“I’m not saying it’s not clever, or impressive,” She replied with a laughing voice, “But don’t you think that people will notice? -”

“- What, a motorcycle tied five stories above the street? This is Tokyo – they’ve seen weirder. -”

“- Or that you’ll get in trouble?”

“... Alright, fair,” Ryuko said after some consideration. “Thanks,” She said to the waiter as he walked off, then took a moment to try – and fail – to reorder her hair. Rei’s bun looked just as immaculate as her dress and since it had been pretty much evenly compressed by the helmet, but the ride over had not been so kind to Ryuko’s exposed head. And she’d spent so long trying to bring some semblance of order to it!

She had no way to know that, far from expecting her date to be perfectly styled, Rei was *more* than happy with her usual dishevelment. It was cute, but not cute as her current frantic, mumbling, tongue-sticking-out-just-slightly efforts. So she let her carry on while they sat down.

“Ok, so,” Ryuko finally gave up, “My counter to that is that A: They know it’s *me* and while I don’t like pulling that crap for anything that matters this is pretty much harmless and B: They’d need a crane to even reach it to give me a ticket.”

“Well... that is true... And it’s not like it’s a handicapped spot or anything.”

“Nope! So I think we’re in the clear,” Ryuko grinned as she picked up a menu. Rei smiled too, she didn’t want to play the concerned party to Ryuko’s antics. Being with (she hesitated to use the word *dating* because that would remind her of the strangeness of what they had together – you couldn’t call it that it was too temporary, too not right for that word) a girl who would happily hang a motorcycle off a cable above a busy city street just to keep it from getting keyed, hell, a girl who *drove* a motorcycle, made her feel young and

carefree. Which wasn't right – she was only twenty-four, what business did she have feeling old now? She just couldn't help herself, though.

“So, third date,” Ryuko started after they'd finished the “what should I order” game and gotten their drinks (wine for Rei, straight whiskey for Ryuko).

Rei lifted an eyebrow “Third? So you don't count New Years?”

“You mean Nonon's victory party? ‘Cuz that's what it was.”

“Mmm, you aren't wrong.”

“Nah, ‘Cuz we didn't go, like, as a couple,” *A couple, oh god*, they both thought. “Or, uh, all the other times, either.” Ah yes, all the other nights that Rei found herself shackled up in Ryuko's penthouse. Sometimes these were initiated by Ryuko, on nights when she had a feeling that The Silence would be especially bad – at least, until she admitted to herself that Rei was more than a convenient solution to that problem. Other times it was a sleepy phone call from Rei after a long day at work – at least, until she admitted to herself that Ryuko was more than a convenient source for a bed and a little extra stress relief close to the office. She didn't count them either, which is probably why neither of them thought anything of the fact that, in the last week, they'd only missed one day.

“Well then, I suppose this is our third date, sure,” Rei conceded. Ryuko seemed proud to have made it to three – she'd learned from TV (because honestly where else was she supposed to learn these things) that in an adult relationship this was a major milestone. “What about it?”

“Well, you know what that means,” Ryuko singsonged. Rei looked confused – she thought she knew what it meant, but that didn't make any sense.

“Y'know, I thought I did, but I was thinking of the of the sex thing, and that can't be right.”

“Ohoho shit no I didn't mean *that*,” Ryuko laughed as she slapped a hand to her forehead, “Yeah no sweetie, you're right that makes no sense. Because we've already – like - multiple times before.”

“Before our first date,” Rei shot back pointedly, as if to say *you hardly need to be so bashful about that at this point*.

“Rihihgt,” Ryuko chuckled awkwardly, “So, you don't know what I meant.”

“Can't say I do.”

“Well,” Ryuko sighed, suddenly just a bit nervous, “I thought it was about time that we talk about, y'know, if we're a couple now. Or like, what we're doing.”

That took Rei by surprise. Hadn't she just been musing about how they weren't dating, couldn't be, that this was just an extended one-night-stand between two women who were too messed up, had too much bad blood between them, to ever make this work?



Evidently Ryuko didn't care about any of that, and why should she? And now that she was forced to decide, say yes or no, did she really care either? Did it *really* matter that Ryuko was *her* daughter, and so eerily similar sometimes? Oh, how angry she'd be if she learned Rei still thought of her that way. And that was the real kicker – she couldn't upset Ryuko. Just like, now, she couldn't – wouldn't – give up waking up with Ryuko's arms wrapped around her chest, so secure and warm.

And besides, she wouldn't have brought it up now, at the beginning of the date not the end, if it weren't already a foregone conclusion. *Oh you clever devil*, she thought wonderingly, *you've forced my hand yet again*. And it was nice to know for sure that Ryuko wanted her, believed they could date like normal people.

"Well, what do you think?" She eventually responded, coyly, with a raised eyebrow.

"I think I really like bein' around you," Ryuko said sweetly, her voice changing to a rarely heard version of itself. Completely bereft of its usual growliness. Rei wondered at it, deeply proud that she was one of the only people Ryuko had ever shown that voice to. Ryuko normally used such a small range of her voice's capabilities that it almost sounded like someone else entirely, almost like – No! She was *not* thinking about that!

"Me too."

"And I think I want to keep doing that for as long as I can."

"Me too."

"So... then..." Rei read from that Ryuko being coy back to her, but in truth Ryuko could hardly believe it. She'd actually been terribly frightened that the very concerns Rei had just fought down would rear their head and scare her away. She hadn't known Rei back then, but she knew Rei wasn't the same woman who had once served Ragyo. After all, if Satsuki could redeem herself than anyone could. But did Rei believe that? Until now she hadn't been sure.

"Ryuko you silly," She extended a hand without really thinking about it, and suddenly Ryuko's fingers were enmeshed in it, stroking along her thumb, "You said it yourself, we are a couple now. And we probably should have called ourselves that much sooner."

"Sweet. Awesome. That's just what I wanted to hear Rei," Ryuko chuckled in relief. Good. This was how it should be in an adult relationship. No bullshit, minimal romantic drivel. They just acknowledged the mutual attraction and then everything was nice and logical from there. She'd just been a high schooler or then a college student playing around with the idea of romance before, but now – she was so lucky to, literally, bump into someone so mature and self-assured. Never could she have predicted the blend of far from self-assured feelings swirling inside of Rei. Sure, she felt that her heart rate in her hands was pretty fast, but she thought nothing of it.

They sat there hand in hand for a moment, marveling at the words: *Rei Hououmaru, my girlfriend*, and *Ryuko Matoi, my girlfriend*. Wondering who would be the first person they would say those words to. Then Rei noticed something over Ryuko's shoulder that caused her to laugh in happy surprise.

"Is that? Oh my god it is! Look Ryuko, there's Sanageyama and Jakuzure, and Saiban too, over there! Table at the other end of the room, see? Huh, what a coincidence!"

"Hmm, yeah that really is them. Neat. Hey-y wait hold on," Ryuko protested, voice back to her usual, when Rei started to stand.

"We should go say hello, come on! It's only polite"

"You've gotta be kidding! No way! Mission abort! C'mon!" Ryuko pretended like she was planting herself in her chair, but despite her incredible power she wasn't about to yank her hand away from her girlfriend. So she waved her free hand in impotent resistance as Rei dragged her away, laughing as she saw that the exact same struggle was playing out between Uzu and Nonon at that very moment.

Then the paparazzi following Nonon finally made it up to the restaurant, and they were all swamped until security showed up to clear them away.

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And so 2066, a year that became nearly as busy as Honnouji for her friends, a year in which the world beyond Japan spiraled yet further out of control with civil wars and famines and various other crises, wound up somehow being the most pleasant and relaxing (although still plenty busy) time Ryuko could remember.

That isn't to say it was entirely because of Rei (although, at times, Ryuko certainly felt it was). It helped that she was finally doing well at something in school:

"I shouldn't have to tell you I know clothing, right?" Rei said, admiring the new cardigan Ryuko had made just for her, sleek and grey and cut just right (Ryuko did know her figure quite well) with brilliant amber buttons to match her eyes. It reminded her of a shark, with its two-tone pattern it quite resembled the foreboding back and light, silky underbelly of one, but she wasn't sure Ryuko had ever seen a shark.

"Right?"

"So, when I say this is *beyond* first rate, I mean it. Like, even if you didn't want to sell these you could work as a tailor – not that you actually need to work, but--"

"- Nah, it's nothing," Ryuko smiled back, "I wasn't gonna let you catch cold out there."

Rei laid her hands on Ryuko's bare shoulders. In the early morning light that scattered off the countertop nobody was around to see how the height disparity made her look a little like a baby raccoon clinging to its mother's back. Not that any of Ryuko's penthouse-

mates would have dared make the comparison or underestimated the power of her massages even at this odd angle. “I’m serious though. You’ve got a gift.”

“Decaf or regular?” Ryuko said, not dodging the point, it was just time to add the coffee beans. She didn’t ask if Rei wanted plain, hazelnut, or vanilla. *Of course*, she wanted hazelnut *mixed* with vanilla, Ryuko was proud to recall.

“Mmm, regular,” Rei nodded, “Gonna be a long day today. Satsuki has *another* press conference, then we’re down to look at the new hydroelectric station they’re building on the waterfront, and then there’s... something else – I don’t know – I have to check my planner.” She yawned, “Not fun, but necessary stuff.”

“She does love to run her mouth, doesn’t she?” Ryuko observed, in reference to Satsuki. Not judging though, it was true and that wasn’t a good or a bad thing.

“Always has.”

“Anyway, I just – I kinda feel like because I’m gifted, I shouldn’t. Because I’d be taking the spot from someone who worked really hard, y’know? Not fair.”

“That would only be true if you had nothing to learn there. Do you really think there’s nothing the professors can teach you?”

“Well, no...”

“Then there you go. You have just as much a right to be there as anyone else. More, you think you haven’t worked hard?” A pause as the coffee machine bubbled and the tension remained in Ryuko’s shoulders. She reached a hand over to touch Rei’s fingers. Warm, but weak, Ryuko could feel the feeble stirring in them. Rei got up too early, her body tried to warn her that she wasn’t a morning person. But still those fingers knew there was tension, sliding under her tank-top to get at the worst of the knot, “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t you think it’s still mad weird though? I mean, even I don’t know *why* I have this gift. It can’t be good though. What will people think?”

“Ryuko,” Rei said softly, “where would the world be now if you rejected your other gifts because of where you got them from? And *since when* have you cared what anyone thought?”

Ryuko stood up straight, thinking. That was a good point.

That day Ryuko filed for a change of major from undeclared to fashion design, and never looked back. When the next quarter rolled around, she went from practically flunking out to... well, not excelling, but doing well in the classes that mattered. She only wished she could hide her identity, to better make sure the praise was real, and not the brown-nosing of professors who didn’t know how to deal with having her in their classes. But she was *pretty* sure she was being recognized for legitimate accomplishments.

And even better, flexing her gift for designing and making clothing seemed to awaken something else: good artistic sense. The last piece of the puzzle, considering she already had the fine control to draw lines far more precise than any ordinary human could, the strength to carve marble with her fingernails, the vision to immediately look at a color in the real world and match it to a paint, and the reflexes to do it all really, really fast. Before, whenever she tried to draw it ended up feeling flat, or too artificial, or too symmetrical, or not symmetrical enough. But now she found herself spending more time filling sketchbooks than she did playing video games. She'd finally figure out how to add that touch of personal impression that made it all work.

Still, as much as she wished it weren't true, she couldn't find anything in any of her classes – drawing, painting, sculpture, music (music, imagine! Would Nonon be overjoyed or livid?) – that was nearly as natural feeling as hand sewing complete outfits from scratch. Because most paintings or sculptures had to be *about* something, and sometimes thinking of a subject was just more brainwork than she wanted. Sometimes she just wanted to sit down, start a project, and figure it out as she went. Individual pieces of clothing weren't about anything in particular (a strange idea, considering what she'd been through), so she could just pick who she was making it for (never for herself), pick a color scheme, and watch in wonder as her hands created something in front of her very eyes.

And it was amazing, really, to be able to use those hands that had destroyed so much, could wreck such havoc on a mere whim, to create. If you'd told the Ryuko who'd arrived on Honnouji's doorstep this was possible, she would have laughed in your face. Even as she wished she could believe it true all the while.

Somewhere in all this, probably around the time she realized she'd never have to worry about Christmas again because she could just make people their gifts, Ryuko realized something else. She no longer had that looming panic over her every time she thought about her future. She was a creative now, she'd embraced this new part of her identity. And that meant that she'd always be able to make a buck from her creations, so long as there was someone to buy them. The details she could figure out as she went, just like sewing a dress, but at least now there wasn't a gaping hole where hopes and plans should go. Ryuko had found something she could do for the rest of her life.

And she wouldn't forget that Rei had been the one to talk her into it.

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[Not actually calling these ones parts anymore, just reorganizing how my outline works]  
Woo boy already splitting 'em. This is part one of a set that explores the Ryuko x Rei ship, as well as what everyone's doing while the guerrilla conflict with REVOCS gears up. Unlike previous, these don't necessarily take place in just one set time, and when exactly different vignettes happen doesn't matter *\*quite\** as much, although you could say they happen in the order the parts cover them in. Like I said, I can't just leave parts un-posted if they're finished, even if it might feel more "complete" the other way. New part will be up idk when, I have a busy weekend so probably not for a couple days.

# In which Ryuko and Nonon do some good old fashioned training

## Chapter Summary

Some Ryuko and Nonon banter, some other stuff. Longer than I expected. Also I'm not calling these next couple parts anymore, I'm just gonna move some stuff around.

February 2066

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Another person who helped make 2066 a good time for Ryuko was, oddly enough, Nonon. For two women who claimed not to be friends, they sure did spend a lot of time together. To be fair, most of that would probably count as work for Nonon:

Ryuko's senses were on high gear as she sprinted through the wreckage of what was, until an hour or so ago, an abandoned trainyard. Derelict slums, landfills, old factories, and other such landscapes of industrial devastation were the best sparring grounds, everyone agreed. Close to home, no living creatures (except rats and crows) to blow away with shockwaves, nothing anybody would miss to tumble into and shatter. Plus, and this mattered an awful lot to the combatants, they were playgrounds of rough terrain that made every bout new and exciting.

Presently Ryuko leapt up over a shipping container to her left, turning a lazy backflip in the air like a breaching dolphin. She landed on the other side with a brief puff of dust and gravel, and – nothing.

“Huh, I could've sworn-,”

“Gotcha bitch!” Nonon screeched, bursting out from *inside* the shipping container, Kiba outstretched. Ryuko was fast enough though, bringing her own weapon up with a clash and a tuning fork ring. Nonon let out a frustrated chuckle and just like that she and Saiban bounded off, Ryuko hot on their heels. The ringing echoed in lightning fast succession through the shredded maze of corrugated metal.

To compete with a hardened life-fiber blade she'd been given a sort of rudimentary pole of the same substance: about the length of a fencing rapier, completely cylindrical, flat on both ends. It had no grip, no balance, no flex, no shock absorption, and absolutely no style. But it *was* the hardest object on Earth. And for that, she was happy to put up with all the rest, her super-strength could make up for its deficiencies. There was no way she was having the scientists make her a new sword, of course.

“You're not getting away so easy this time!” Ryuko shouted, leaping up the beams of a crane after Nonon, who swung about on her prehensile coattail, light as a feather. The blows came

down on her vertically, and it was all she could do to block them, having to use her free hand and feet to clamber in a much less artful manner. It was infuriating how quickly she'd incorporated the new appendage into her acrobatics, and fury was a great motivator for Ryuko.

She overshot Nonon, tucking her legs to avoid a horizontal slash on the way up, then came back down with a brutal overhead slam. Nonon blocked it, and Ryuko had dialed her strength so they would match, neither overpowering the other (doing her best to ignore the itching urge to go all-out. It only seemed to get worse the closer she was). But the beam about which Nonon's tail was wrapped was not so lucky. It snapped, and before they knew it the entire crane was crumbling, bringing them back down to ground level, both managing to keep their feet on the landing.

"Stupid! That was my favorite part of this arena you just trashed!" Nonon said as she sprung forward, but then Ryuko heard something over the crumbling groans of the collapsing crane that made her break her ready position, just a moment before Saiban sensed it to and told Nonon to hold up. Panicked screams.

"Ah fuck, onlookers," Ryuko said, and sure enough she saw that as the horizontal top of the crane, many stories in the air, slumped to the side it was doomed to fall outside the training area, past the chain-link fence and right into a currently stampeding crowd. This was the one real downside to using areas so near the city for training – onlookers were a constant nuisance.

First some news trucks would show up, snap a few grainy photos of a midair clash, report on it like this was a shocking new development and not a nearly daily ritual, then security would clear them away. Far harder to see off the locals, though. A superhuman battle between two of the most famous, glamorous women on Earth in your own backyard?

~ "I was going to warn you" ~ Houka piped in via earpiece as Ryuko rocketed over at her very top speed (ah yes, now her body was caught up to her mind. It was almost as if The Silence had gone away) ~ "But you've already got it" ~. Catching the falling crane was no big deal, she hadn't spent so many months practicing this very sort of rescue work for nothing. Still...

"That was close. Sorry, my bad," Ryuko grunted as she gently set the crane down.

"Don't try and catch a breather now, come on!" Nonon taunted when it was clear the danger was over.

"Not like I need one! You know I'm only exerting myself at like ten percent, right?" Ryuko retorted as she vaulted back to where she'd left off

"Don't remind me," Nonon muttered.

"What was that?"

"Rrrr! I said I'm gonna knock that stupid stick out of your hand and crack your skull with it, then we'll see who's laughing!"

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“Well, Ryuko’s right, that one was too close for comfort,” Tsumugu grumbled. “We need to keep these onlookers away, or at least reduce them. Really, it’s just unprofessional to have this keep happening”

“If only it were so easy. There’s that one place on the other side of town where we can just kick them out, but here it’s public land, they’ve got every right to be there,” Aikuro observed.

Houka nodded, “Plus they’ve already completely flattened that place.”

“Reminds me,” Satsuki said, as close to absentmindedly as she did anything, “I’ll have to send a cleanup crew to remove the crane after they’re done.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Rei volunteered, already whipping out her phone to make the arrangements. Satsuki barely nodded in acknowledgement – this was typical of the distant attitude she’d adopted with Rei lately which left her with a clawing “*What did I do?*” unasked in her chest.

Was Satsuki just overworked? She knew she’d been losing sleep lately, in fact she was one of the four people (the others being Nonon, Shiro, and Soroi) who knew about the night terrors that were troubling her for the first time in months. No, she would have apologized by now for being out of it. And it wasn’t that Satsuki had finally decided to be uncomfortable working with someone whose job it was to kill her should the need arise – she wasn’t inconsistent enough for that. So she must be unhappy with some aspect of her work. But what? It had to be her political theory, her ideas – she was still new at such things, projecting a confidence that she didn’t have. (The thought that it had anything to do with her dating Satsuki’s dear sister hadn’t occurred to her yet, especially since Satsuki had said she was happy for them when they first told her)

But how to tell Satsuki she was trying her best, and that if she didn’t seem to be improving any it was only a matter of time? For the moment they both stood in their normal stoicism alongside the scientists in the little bulletproof plexiglass bubble, watching Nonon and Ryuko duel. But Rei was working, striving to start now, coming up with some solution for this project that would be creative enough to put her back in Satsuki’s good graces.

“What if we televised it?”

“I’m sorry?” Houka turned to her.

“If we started recording and airing these training matches. It’s not like we keep the locations a secret, we want everyone to see what they can do, right? I don’t think it would keep them all away, but if most of them knew they could watch the same thing – better actually, we could get camera drones in pretty close - from the safety of their homes I think it would make a dent. Plus, it would basically make all the reporters obsolete.”

“Ooh, and we could spin it out into more coverage as the rest of the Kamui line is finished!” Aikuro said. Of course this was the sort of idea Aikuro would like.



“In the interest of transparency, we should probably at least tell people where and when they’re training so nobody is taken by surprise anymore,” Tsumugu added (local authorities and businesses were alerted, but there’d been a few panics when they first started because passersby thought there was something exploding nearby). “And if we’re going to do that, the only way to stop us from being swamped with tourists is to provide an alternative.”

“And you’ve got to admit, people in this country were quite used to blood sports before we banned them,” Houka nodded, “That’s actually one of the only things the new government gets criticized for. So that leaves an opening for this kind of content. It might be violent, but at least nobody dies.”

All of these might have seemed like agreement, like “*oh, why hadn’t I thought of that?*” but in reality they were directed at Satsuki, the moral pillar against which all hair-brained schemes had to be vetted. For a moment she kept silent – everyone seemed to think she could instantly calculate the outcome of any action, but in truth it took a minute. This one wasn’t too complex though. “I’ll need to consult with my lawyers about whether we should publish the footage on government public access or the research center’s website, to avoid being accused of exploiting an opening we created,” That was how she decided to say yes. Rei smiled as the scientists dove into conversation about how they would implement this new idea, but she was still unsatisfied as Satsuki turned back to the fight, until...

“That was a clever suggestion Rei, I think it’ll make Nonon very happy. Ryuko less so, but she’ll go along with it” Satsuki said softly, and if Rei listened close, she might’ve heard a little bit of how Satsuki’s body rebelled against paying the complement, despite her mind knowing there was no logical reason for this jealousy.

Little did any of them know, but that day Rei had planted the seed of what would, in later years, become known as The Kamui Games. Other nations would say the Japanese had gone mad, to revel in the power that had nearly destroyed the world so wantonly. But that was mere propaganda, and behind closed doors people around the world would tune in in the billions. But that’s a story for another day.

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At that moment, conversation was halted by the sound of Nonon shouting in a sudden panic: “***Oh Fuck! Fuck! I – she – I decapitated her!***”

Across the trainyard, Nonon had finally managed to score a hit on Ryuko. This would be her tenth of the day – the rules were the same as back before Saiban: first to score a hit won the bout, then they’d reset. This time was different though. Nonon had used her tail to deflect Ryuko’s pole and then slid past her, and as they fell together Kiba’s blade dove straight for her exposed neck (no more exposed than the rest of her, mind, because she still fought in the nude since her clothes would just get bloody or shredded).

In that moment, Ryuko considered using the full extent of her reaction time to evade Kiba, but *nah, fuck it, she earned this. Didn’t even cheat this time.* And besides, she was about to have an experience that she’d been dreading, and she might as well get it over with now so she’d know what to do later. A philosophical, mature attitude towards getting your head removed.

Her vision rolled along the dry gravel, revealing a hauntingly beautiful panorama of her own still-standing body showering blood onto Nonon's terror-stricken face (Saiban looked less panicked, probably because he sensed that she was still alive). But her heart – which still felt like it was beneath her neck, not *over there* – dropped when she saw something in the background she wasn't expecting. In the plexiglass bubble Satsuki had fainted cold, falling into Aikuro's arms. *Shit, that wasn't supposed to happen.*

"Satsuki! Shit, is she okay?" She shouted, completely forgetting to be weirded out by the current, detached nature of her physical self. Nonon didn't forget though.

"WHAAAAT!!!" she screeched, and Ryuko pulled a snarky face at the unnecessary distraction.

"Uh, hello? You saw this shit happen to Ragyo, right?" She walked over and picked her head back up gently, again forgetting to notice how easy it was to keep herself spatially oriented without looking where her body was going. Or how none of this hurt. She plopped it back on with a squishing noise, not quite lined up, but the life fibers took care of that and she was back to normal. "Hey Rei, is she alright?"

~ "She's fine, she's coming around," ~ Rei said, getting just a little secondhand angry at Ryuko, and a little bad that her own protective instincts for *her girlfriend* couldn't overwhelm the logic that had told her Ryuko would be fine, ~ "Don't scare us like that!" ~

"I know, shit I'm sorry. But hey, you guys knew I could do that," *Yeah, and Satsuki knew it more than most. All too well,* the sensible part of her said as she brushed gravel off her still-immaculate cheek. "Fuck. Fuck I'm sorry."

Rei sighed ~ "Yeah, we know, just be careful from now on. ~

[See I told you she was alright, I told you she's beyond powerful]

"Hey, why are you apologizing?" Nonon shouted, feeling a similar guilt and wanting to have her turn to apologize, nevermind that Satsuki was still mumbling, working her way back to her feet. "It was my fault, Satsuki, I'm sorry!"

"Because if I'd wanted to, I could've avoided that *so* easily."

"Wha – you!" Nonon rounded on her, "Your head was on the ground not five seconds ago! I thought you were dead!"

"And that's why we don't use cross-cuts in training. If I thought there was any actual danger, I wouldn't have given you an inch."

"Rrrgh! You are such a bitch!"

"You want me to punch you again?"

[No!]

~ “We’re done for today.” ~ Satsuki declared. She was overcome with relief that Ryuko was okay, and a stinging afterimage of the worst moment in her life: *when Ragyo’s headless body began to move*. And humiliation. Everyone looking at her with such concern, it wasn’t right. She had to stay strong and absorb all the fear, otherwise everything was done for. ~ “Pack everything up boys.” ~ She took off her headset and left the pod.

With that the tension was dispelled. Saiban powered down, and Nonon and Ryuko started walking back to the bubble.

“Alright, fine, I’ll admit it. That was a good move,” Ryuko said as Nonon shrunk Kiba back into a hair pin and put it in its place.

“Hmmp, about time.”

“Hey Sats!” Ryuko ran over as soon as she saw Satsuki, “Sorry to give you a scare.”

Satsuki responded with a sort of tired looking smile, “It’s alright. I think it made things worse by not drinking enough water today.” Ryuko went to hug her, but there was an awkward moment of hesitation - not the least because Ryuko was naked and dripping with blood, but also something else that mystified Ryuko, that she couldn’t read on Satsuki’s face.

“Oh right, shit that’s a nice coat, nevermind.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki chuckled, ruffling Ryuko’s hair instead, “And wouldn’t you know how much of a pain it is to get blood out of clothing.”

“Yeah, y’know, I might.”

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“Hey, uh, quick Q for you,” Nonon said as Ryuko was getting dressed. The scientists were done packing up their computers, and they were waiting there with Satsuki and Rei for their cars to arrive.

“Uh, sure?”

“Do you uh, do you want to go to the art museum with me and Saiban?”

“Wait, seriously? Cuz I’m trying to figure out how this is a joke and I -,”

“- Wha -fuck off! This is your supposed to be your thing now, right?”

“Well yeah, but...” *but I’ve actually never been to an art museum*, she thought, although she was never going to admit that to Nonon.

“But what? C’mon, Saiban wants an expert and you are, somehow, the best we’ve got.”

*[I honestly can’t believe it myself]*

“I know, right?”

*[Oh, not because of what you're thinking. Nothing to do with personality.]*

“Sorry, I’m gonna pass. Seems like a hassle.”

“What! What on Earth makes it a hassle.”

“Don’t you think the two of us, three of us, sorry, together in a museum might draw a bit of a crowd?”

“Duh, we’ll just call ahead and go after it closes.”

*Oh, that actually sounds kind of fun.* “Eh, you know what, sure,” Ryuko said, “Hey Rei, you wanna go to the art museum?”

“Uh...” Rei already had her planner out, so she flipped through it, “When?”

“Oh no! You’re not gonna third-wheel me!”

“Well you have Saiban! You’re gonna talk to him like, half the time anyway!” Which sounded like it might honestly be torture. Just a further reminder of what she’d lost. She almost wanted to pivot and turn her down, but she’d already made a commitment and despite what Nonon might’ve thought she did consider her a friend.

“*You*, of all people, think he counts as like a date or something? He’s the one who wants you to come, you realize,” Nonon said with gritted teeth. “Fine. Then I’m bringing Uzu.”

“Hey, c’mon man no fair! Two against one!”

*[This getting too complex. Maybe we should just go ourselves.]*

“Oh wait shit, I can’t, he’s over in China trying to convince them we aren’t a walking, talking WMD,” Uzu had reprised his role as diplomat since Saiban’s reveal. “Dammit,” Nonon groaned.

“Alright, then I guess it’s settled. Rei and I will see you at the art museum!”

“Rrrgh-,”

“- Nonon, can you figure this out later?” Satsuki asked, phone to her ear, “There’s been an attack near Osaka and we need you there, pronto!”

“Again!” Nonon groaned even louder. The hope had been the REVOCS would back down after Saiban was unveiled, but if anything they were emboldened. Before there had been car bombings, occasional shootings, attempted assassinations, but now they were sending squads armed with Ultima Uniforms, trying to force Nonon’s hand. Nonon was the only force reasonably able to defeat them (besides Ryuko, who didn’t want to get involved *just yet*). The police had needle guns, sure, but they were just good guys and girls from

around the neighborhood, great for making them nonthreatening, not so much against trained terrorists with the strength of raging elephants. So Nonon was, almost once a day, being helicoptered somewhere in Japan to combat REVOCS goons waiting for her. Sometimes they would sync things up to launch another attack somewhere else when Nonon got to the scene. It was very frustrating, Ryuko could empathize.

“Fine, we’ll settle this later!” She shouted as a helicopter materialized from a cloudy sky and she was unceremoniously shuttled off, leaping up to it - some ninety feet - so it didn’t even have to land.

~~~~~

They never did settle things. Ryuko only ended up going to the museum without Rei because she happened to be busy that evening. So Nonon got what she wanted in the end, and really Ryuko wasn’t too upset about that. Because they were friends, somehow, and Saiban was considerate about not distracting Nonon (he had more than enough to look at). And because Nonon had accidentally killed another REVOCS soldier that afternoon, and failed to save a few bystanders. She needed to forget about that and pretend that it didn’t hurt.

And yeah, running around the darkened marble halls with no-one else around *was* fun. By the end of the night they were shouting their conversations at each other from across rooms just for the sheer novelty of shouting in an art museum.

They didn’t mention Satsuki’s fainting spell (in fact, nobody who’d been there ever did). I was just so out of their image of Satsuki it was just... easier to pretend it hadn’t happened.

In which Ryuko and Rei have an argument

Chapter Summary

So... this should've been out a few days earlier, but then St. Pat's weekend happened. So - in recompense, I've extended this one. I really like it, I hope you do too.

Oh yeah and this shit's probably pretty typo heavy, sorry about that! If you spot any particularly nasty ones let me know, I'll try to edit it again tomorrow.

February 2066

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If you had asked Rei, when she was first released from the custody of her psychiatrist, what sort of romantic partner she wanted now that she was free, she wouldn't have known how to respond. There were just so many other things to do – helping Satsuki get first Japan and then the world back on track was obviously more important – and besides that to get a girlfriend she would first have to clear her good name, which might take a while. But that didn't mean there wasn't an answer, an answer that bore shocking resemblance to Ryuko.

Of course, she would never have dreamed that it would be Ryuko, or that it would happen so soon. But slowly, starting when Ryuko called her back after that first hook-up and ending when they official started dating, she realized she'd found something special. A human dynamo like her sister, but instead of turning her irrepressible energy into a work ethic that put even Rei to shame Ryuko turned it outward.

Every day was a new adventure; sure, she went to class and Rei to work, but after that there was always someone new to meet – so many classmates and friends Rei was dazzled by them all - and some new hidden nook of Tokyo's night life to explore – seedy and often dingy sure, but *real*. Ragyo had been right to keep her cloistered up in that glowing tower, ferried back and forth by helicopter between debaucherous galas and secret labs, telling so many lies about how the rest of humanity lived. If she'd known about this, that this was what humanity could be at its best, its most genuine, then all Ragyo's work conditioning her would have been undone the moment some college students yelled, "Hey, you there! You wanna dance with us?"

And Ryuko moved through this new world with such easy, casual grace, it was impossible not to be captivated. It wasn't even that she was famous – no, she actually preferred when people didn't recognize her – she was just the life of every party all on her own. And it wasn't just parties, Ryuko was full of all these ideas to pass the time that Rei would never have dreamt up: "Let's go to the amusement park!" "Let's go learn archery!"

“Let’s sneak into Nonon’s recording studio when she’s out and mess around with the equipment!” (that last one had led to them running afoul of Uzu stopping by on his lunch break, but once he was sure they hadn’t broken anything Ryuko managed to talk him into joining them, saying “haven’t you always wanted to try that huge drum set over there?”). All that, and she still managed to spend half the night or more out patrolling the city and helping those in need.

To Rei, this was just *so* incredible. The impulsivity, the confidence, and yes, the bravery; she knew she could never be like that. She couldn’t just do what she wanted, live in the moment, though that was clearly the way humans were meant to live. She was just along for the wild ride, being shown all these new joys, and she didn’t deserve it. She felt like a leech. (little did she know how long Ryuko spent cooking up new ideas to put a smile on Rei’s face, or how tricky it was to find the perfect thing). Rei couldn’t understand that mindset no matter how she adored it, it was just... *wow*. To her Ryuko was like a force of nature, a being that acted on instinct and endless vigor. Rei understood now why she had been fated to win the war. She was everything Ragyo had told her to hate about humanity, a paragon of what the species could be.

And yet, as a being of instinct, sometimes she had to be lead to doing the right thing. Because all of that was great, incredible, everything that Rei admired and that made her feel like a kid again, but there was one problem. She *wasn’t* human – and this truth occurred to Rei all too frequently on the way to work, driving past all the slums that were still standing despite Satsuki’s constant efforts. Those instincts, they told Ryuko: be an ordinary college girl, get your homework done (when you feel like it), hang out with your friends, remember to call mom, and get drunk and have sex regularly. All well and good, if she were only an ordinary human that could do nothing about the slums, or about the fact that things were only getting worse around the world.

Imagine, a Ryuko who used her powers to intimidate world leaders, complete massive construction projects in mere days, call her billions of fans and followers to action. Because if she didn’t now, not only did REVOCS have four Kamui lurking in some hidden base, but sooner or later other world powers would figure out how to use life fibers, and then everyone would wish they’d nipped that in the bud. Rei knew these things, everyone except Ryuko knew these things, but nobody would tell her (not even Satsuki, the surest proof that Satsuki really had turned over a new leaf). So, Rei had to occasionally be the one to bite the bullet.

And so they had arguments. Hot tempers – Ryuko’s worn on her sleeve, Rei’s hidden in reserve – clashing not *too* frequently, but certainly more than either would’ve liked. Rei didn’t think about the stories of a childhood of loneliness and violence, of Ryuko just wishing she could be normal for once (they were so foreign from anything she knew about Ryuko that she completely discounted them) just the same as Ryuko truly didn’t think that the world might still need her saving.

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One of their most major arguments, actually their first big one, got started when Shiro asked Ryuko to help design the next Kamui line. She’d refused, and Rei couldn’t understand that. But everyone else had let it be without much protest, even Satsuki and Shiro

had just nodded as if to say, “well that’s that then”. Rei also couldn’t understand why they didn’t push it any harder, after all Uzu was dying to get his own Kamui now that Nonon had one, Satsuki needed to prove to public that Kamui were stable creatures that could be seen as heroes, and then there was Shiro.

He looked especially deflated – unanswered questions about the Kamui’s sentience ruled his curiosity, and he knew that without Ryuko’s help they’d never get around to one of his more eccentric pet projects: a Kamui for Mako or Mataro. Because the Mankanshoku’s life-fiber compatibility values were *insanely* high, especially Mako’s, and he just needed to see what would happen (Rei had to admit she was curious about that too, the Mankanshoku girl had shown promise when she’d kidnapped her for the Honnouji Defcon system).

But when she’d opened her mouth to protest, Satsuki had looked at her and shrugged. Rei left the lab confused and frustrated. What was that supposed to mean? They had to expect Ryuko would come around, right? They needed her, her ability to precisely move life-fibers with her mind (Rei knew more than most how useful this power was), otherwise they wouldn’t even have one done in time. Did they expect *her* to talk to Ryuko and change her mind? They had to, right?

She didn’t find a moment to bring it up for a couple days though, until the weekend rolled around. For the first time in forever everyone was back together for a night of fun and relaxation, starting off at *S-Tier Rebuilt* and later transitioning to Ryuko’s penthouse to finish the night.

Mako and Ira had taken the train in from Kansai (Ira had to be in the capital that weekend anyway and Mako finagled her schedule to match), Houka and Shiro were there in matching suits Ryuko had made for them, Uzu was back from China and had Nonon (and a wildly overwhelmed looking Saiban) hanging on his arm, Aikuro was obviously in attendance, and even Tsumugu and his wife Aoi made an appearance. The only one absent was Satsuki, but that was no problem. She was back at the penthouse getting some work done – they’d meet her there and she’d have plenty of time to spend with them all. And besides, it wasn’t like she wanted to drink anyway. Still, with all of them and a bunch of Ryuko’s college friends tagging along they practically *were* the nightclub.

That Ryuko and Nonon had both selected this club to be their primary haunt had changed its atmosphere quite a lot. Mostly for the better – business was booming as people came from all over to see what all the fuss was about. But then there were the sorts who were there *specifically* for the girls and their friends – for autographs, product endorsements, headline worthy hot takes, and tabloid worthy snaps of Ryuko and Rei getting handsy (which didn’t happen as often as with Ryuko’s previous hookups since Rei wasn’t a big fan of PDA). But when Ryuko and Nonon both went to Satsuki griping about how they didn’t want such hangers on ruining everyone’s experience, she’d helped the club beef up its security and it became less of a problem. So really, it was for the best that they usually chose *S-Tier*, it helped keep everything consistent.

Ryuko was having a great time, mostly thanks to Mako. She’d been right, it sucked being away from your bestie even if you texted her almost constantly, but luckily Mako’s schedule this semester let her come into Tokyo with Ira practically whenever he needed to

visit the supermax. And that was only becoming more frequent as more REVOCS operatives were captured, although so far only one, Itsuki, had turned informant.

“Ooooh Iiraaaaa look! They’ve got karaoke rooms! We should sing a duet! Look, Houka and Shiro are going in!”

“Oh, well, uh, I don’t think I’m a very good singer,” Ira stammered as Mako pouted, and Ryuko smiled watching it. It was just the same dynamic Mako had with her – before, during, and after the time when they dated – really the same she had with basically everyone. She was overly, ludicrously enthusiastic about whatever odd idea she had, while the other party played the unimpressed cynic who didn’t want to get dragged in. But they could never win.

“Whaaat? You don’t have to be a good singer! I’m a terrible singer and I’m still gonna do it!”

“Wait, you *know* your singing is bad?” He exclaimed incredulously, but she was already on to the next thing.

“Nonon, you’ll help me teach Ira how to sing, right?”

“What makes you think I’m any good at that?” She replied from inside her glass.

“You could be all like ‘no that’s supposed to be an A-sharp not a B-flat!’” A spot-on impression, and Nonon sputtered in a rage.

“I do not sound like that! And those are the same note! Yeah no, I’ll pass,” She piped. One of her ironclad rules of her music was that she didn’t sing. Write lyrics, sure, but she hired out other popular singers rather than publish her own way-too-shrill voice, “And what are *you* laughing at, asshole?” She rounded on Uzu when he chuckled.

“Hey, c’mon Nonon, you know you’d go off on Ira exactly like that. And I think you’re a pretty good singer, actually,” He shot back, disarming her.

“You – seriously?” She side eyed him skeptically.

“Well yeah. After all, I’ve heard you make some pretty beautiful music, if you know what I mean,” He dropped his punchline with a wink and a shit-eating grin.

“All right, *that’s* it!” Nonon huffed and gave him a shove, face beet red.

“Aw, just for that?”

“I’m ignoring all of you now!” Rei had to stifle a giggle when Nonon turned to her with a polite smile, “I’m sorry Rei what were we talking about? Some noble acquaintance of ours, yes?” As Rei went back to reminiscing with Nonon about stupid rich people they used to know, Ryuko returned to watching Mako and Ira.

“Well she’s not being very fun,” Mako said, “But we can come with you guys, right?” She asked Houka and Shiro

“Well, we were going to go alone -,” Shiro began.

“ – But you’re more than welcome,” Houka finished, and Shiro nodded agreeably, leaving Ryuko uncertain whether that had been what Shiro was going to say or not.

“Well I’ll be joining too then,” Aikuro stood, straightening his tie so that somehow his collar hung open a little more than before.

“Yeah might as well, if I’m being snubbed over here,” Uzu got up too, taking his beer with him.

“Hey! I did say you could do that?” Nonon looked over in alarm.

“Well, you didn’t say I couldn’t!”

Mako looked to Ira now, hopefully, and he shrugged, “It can’t hurt to try.”

“Yaaay!” Mako grabbed him by a beefy hand and led him off. It was cute how she’d rubbed off on him already, becoming more laid-back and open. He’d probably been Ryuko’s least favorite of Satsuki’s cronies way back when they’d first become allies (was it because he was into Mako? No, of course not!), but now you could really have a normal conversation with the guy.

Of course, he’d also rubbed off on Mako, giving her an edge of work ethic and an eye for practicalities that she’d been lacking before. But this actually made her all the more dangerous, because now she foresaw the problems in her madcap schemes that used to halt them in their tracks. Like last weekend, when she threw together an impromptu road trip around Kansai with Ira, Ryuko and a couple of her college friends – the goal being to sample every restaurant featured on one of her favorite live action drama shows.

Once, they might have started running low on battery halfway through and had to turn back, but Mako wasn’t quite so ditsy as before. She’d mapped their route in advance so when the car battery was low – oh look! There was a charging station right there! Ryuko nearly threw up twice; her stomach was so unused to eating much as she’d been eating a reasonable amount for a hybrid (so almost nothing except on special occasions).

I can do that to! Ryuko thought as she reached over Rei’s shoulder. “Well, how ‘bout it?”

“Karaoke hmm? Well, I can’t say I’ve ever tried it before.”

“Ah don’t sweat it, there’s no way you’ll be as bad as Ira and Mako,” Ryuko held her hand to side of her mouth conspiratorially, “She’s *really* bad, trust me.” When she got up, Rei went with her, giggling. Was she sure she’d like Karaoke? No, but she’d trusted Ryuko with plenty worse. She’d bail her out if she was having a bad time. Ryuko turned to Nonon now, “Well, c’mon, you’re not gonna sit here just the two of you,” (Tsumugu and Aoi were seated at the bar, leaving Nonon and Saiban now the last ones at their table)

“Hmph! Maybe I am, you don’t know!” She responded, but went with them anyway.

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A few songs and rounds of drinks later and it was Ryuko's turn. Houka and Shiro had done a completely competent job, Ira and Mako had bombed (Mako broke down laughing halfway through the song – at what, even she didn't seem to know), and then, with Nonon still refusing to sing, Aikuro and Uzu had joined forces for a duet more over-the-top than anyone expected. At that point, probably about when they both – with no prior planning – dropped to a knee with arms up in the air like they were headlining at a rock concert, everybody was laughing so hard that the bartender had to check if everything was okay.

A tough act to follow, but now everybody was limbered up and into it. Well, everyone except Rei, who was still a little nervous, and Nonon, who was having a snide conversation with Saiban in which she seemed to be explaining (badly) what Karaoke was, why she didn't like it, and why she wouldn't sing.

“How about this one?” Mako said, leaning over the computer screen with Ryuko.

“Ooh, nahn,” Ryuko shook her head, sucking on her teeth, “That's one of hers.” She jerked her head over to Nonon, reading *Regalia* in the “artist” slot.

“But it's one of your favorites, I thought.”

“Yeah, and she *can't* find that out!” Mako shot her a “c'mon” look, but Ryuko wasn't budging, until...

“But it's a duet. You wanted a duet, right?” That was right. Ryuko was plenty aware that Rei still looked a bit awkward, and she needed to do something about that.

“Yeah, alright, queue it up. Yo Rei, get down here!” Rei looked like she was going to jump out of her skin.

“Wha – me?”

“Yeah, c'mon, this is a duet number too. We gotta show those guys who's boss, right?” *Oh boy, I'm gonna need this*, Rei thought as she downed the rest of her drink. She already felt pretty tipsy, a sort of soothing warmth spreading from her belly. Getting drunk used to be a source of anxiety for her, it was hard now to relearn it as part of a good time. But seeing Ryuko up there, so confident, she almost forgot for a second. *Shit, yeah, alright, whatever you say!*

But when she was up at the front of the room, trying to listen as Ryuko explained how it all worked, the appraising eyes wouldn't let up. The eyes of people who used to be her enemies, who she was pretty sure still didn't think she belonged with them. She felt small, not sure they even knew how much she wanted to be there with them, and to enjoy it. Did they think less of Ryuko for bringing her along?

Then Mako gave her a thumbs up, a huge smile, and a mouthed “you got this!”. Rei didn't really care for Mako – this by all appearances ordinary girl who seemed destined to become a housewife and offered no resistance to her fate. Why did Ryuko hold her in such

high regard? Frankly, Rei thought she was setting a bad example for someone as extraordinary as Ryuko. That, and Rei couldn't help but dislike that every time Mako was in town, Ryuko would go off to do things with her just the two of them. (Little did she know that Ryuko didn't think Rei would appreciate "Mako things", her word for the lazy, unproductive nothing that they usually did together. Rei had to be *doing* something, she wouldn't get just sitting feeding the ducks at the park for hours, right?)

But seeing that encouraging smile, Rei got what Ryuko liked about her. Everyone belonged with her. And hadn't Ryuko once been their enemy too?

"You ready?" Ryuko asked, giving her a little shake.

"Mhm! We've got this!"

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When the song was done, it was greeted with appreciative applause.

"I must say, I've known you all my life, and I had no idea you could sing like that Rei," Shiro nodded.

"Aw well, we weren't exactly friends back then. A-and it's not like I had any training or anything, I've just heard this song before," Rei said demurely. Those eyes didn't look nearly so hostile now. It would take more than one song to become of the gang, but still, she felt like they were looking at her not as *Ryuko's girlfriend*, but as *Rei*. Even Nonon was sitting up at attention.

"Well still, that was – not that I know much about music – pretty good. Wouldn't you say, Nonon?"

"Hmm, what I can tell you is that this one," She pointed at Ryuko, "Has absolutely no pitch control! Swinging all over like a goddamn police siren."

"Aw man!" Ryuko groaned, "Looks like I'm just dead weight, holding you down," She threw a hand over her forehead and went on, dramatically, "Just promise me you won't forget me when you're a star!"

When Rei and Ryuko sat back down, Nonon turned to her, saying "That was... interesting. You've given me an idea, actually."

"Wait, really? I gave *you* an idea? Well, what is it?"

"You'll see. You've just got a very unique singing voice, is all." Rei smiled. Nonon played hard to impress, always had, so if you got through to her that meant something.

"So? Karaoke review?" Ryuko nudged her.

"Oh! It's good, it's good. I don't know why I always get so nervous."

“Nah, nah we all do it sometimes. I used to be such a little shut-in, y’know. Oh, speaking of which, watch this.”

“Next up, Nonon!” Mako called, as if on cue. Nonon jumped a full foot in her chair.

“Ohh no! I thought I made it very clear that I wasn’t,” Mako had already pressed the play button. It was one of her own songs. “What the hell are you doing!”

“Nonon! Nonon! Nonon!” Ryuko started the chant, Mako picked it up, and soon everyone was egging her own. Face redder than her hair, Nonon bolted for the exit.

“Nonon! Hey, c’mon,” Uzu made her stop up short, “I don’t know who told you you had a bad voice, but if I ever see ‘em I’m gonna punch ‘em for ya!”

“Shut up! I told you I didn’t -,” Now Saiban was saying something to her too, “You to? Fine! I’ll prove it to you!” Suddenly she was stalking up, grabbing the microphone from Mako’s hand. Rei had known Nonon for a long time too, so to see her cave in (for someone other than Satsuki) was really a sight to behold. As she nestled into Ryuko’s chest to watch Nonon scream out the lyrics, she had to acknowledge that, yeah, this was really fun.

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“God that was great!” Ryuko shouted, flopping onto the bed with her clothing in a messy state of half undress. Even she – with her practically unlimited reserves of energy, was exhausted, although the liquor didn’t help with that. Rei was about the same, if not more thoroughly done with everything. She felt herself sobering up with a light headache, frustrated because she felt torn between “no, don’t leave!” and “everyone get out and let me sleep!”.

By the time they’d managed to chase everyone out it was late into the night, but Ryuko didn’t have to worry about patrolling the city that night, it was Nonon’s turn. Rei was a little worried she might be too drunk, but apparently Saiban didn’t get drunk when she did, and he could basically puppet her body with her permission. So, thank god, there was nothing to stop them from sleeping. Nothing except for Rei’s own pent up temper.

“Damn, I just wish we could do this more often, y’know?” Ryuko said as she rolled over, lazily pulling the sheet around herself. Something about how lazily, obviously Ryuko said that pushed Rei’s annoyance over the edge

“You know, they’re all pulling their weight,” She said from the doorway of the walk in closet.

Ryuko looked up, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were wondering why we couldn’t have nights like this often,” Rei shrugged, “I’m just telling you why.”

“You’re telling me it like you expect me to do something about it. Wait - you’re not seriously talking about the Kamui now, are you?” (now that Saiban had been revealed all the secrecy was over and done with)

“What if I am?”

“Oh my god, seriously? Did Shiro put you up to this?” Ryuko whined.

“No, of course not! You just - you act like you don’t know why we can’t do this more often – or like there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Well, there’s nothing I’m *going* to do about it.”

“Seriously?”

“What, you seriously think I should?”

“Yes! Of course you should, you’re the only one who can.”

“Have ya never heard the old saying ‘just because you can, doesn’t mean you should?’”

“That’s not a saying, that’s from a movie or something.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not true!” Ryuko was genuinely angry now. She knew she shouldn’t have considered this issue done. But why couldn’t she just let everyone do their own thing over there while she lived her own life? Obviously it was going to be a slippery slope from helping in the first raid to sparring with Nonon to this. But now that she was being dragged back in, despite what she’d once told Satsuki, she didn’t want this.

“Fine then. Give me one good reason why you shouldn’t help them – that’s all they want, help.” Rei crossed their arms. Ryuko didn’t like this. Rei was much smarter than her, she probably had every possible comeback planned out already. Better choose the smartest sounding answer.

“Well, for one, this is the exact arms-race bullshit I warned them about, like, months ago! Like back in the 1900s with the cold war and shit. I thought you guys were smarter than to repeat history,” She said venomously. *Yeah, you’re all soo much smarter than me, huh? Why can I figure this shit out and not you?*

“We aren’t starting an arms race, Ryuko, we’re ending it before it begins.”

“Right, I’m sure they said that too! Like, they already have *four* Kamuis, and you say the arms race isn’t already started.”

“Yeah, they have four. Ryuko, Nui made those based off of Junketsu years ago. They don’t know how to make more!” Rei sneered derisively, “I don’t think they even have the abilities without a hybrid or your father’s research.”

“Sure, you say that now.”

“Well even if that’s so, they still have four Kamuis now. They must not have wearers for them yet or they’d have used them already, but once they do, they won’t hesitate.”

“So? Me and Nonon can take ‘em!”

“Ryuko they will kill Nonon.”

“No.”

“She’s as strong as you were when you first bonded with Senketsu. Against *four* of Junketsu at once. Do you really think she’ll have a chance.” *Fuck. No.* Ryuko realized with horror. An image of Nonon torn apart by creatures moving their human hosts like puppets flashed before her mind. Like vultures.

“T-then I’ll take care of them.”

“You think you could manage it?”

“Probably.”

“Maybe. Do you really want to find out?”

“Well, I...”

“Yeah. You see the problem. Look, it doesn’t make any sense not to help. They’re going to do it anyway, it will just take a lot longer.”

“So? If they’re going to do it anyway then what’s the problem ? I don’t have to defeat their Kamuis, I just have to protect everyone until they can make the new ones. They can’t stop me from doing that.”

“That’s absurd! It could take years!”

“That doesn’t matter though. They can’t win if we’re careful enough.”

“... Ryuko, what do you think REVOCS is after?”

“... Uh, to kill Satsuki and me?” Rei was looking at her in an appalled manner. “Is that not right?”

“No of course it’s not, don’t be stupid! They’re trying to destabilize the new order, turn things back the way they were back when Ragyo ruled.”

“Pfft. Nobody’s gonna let them do that.”

“No? This experiment is something new, everyone’s used to living under the dynasties. Satsuki’s made a lot of promises that things are going to get better, and if they make her wrong, she’s lost.”

“What? Well, but things are better now! Like, so much better.”

“Ryuko, you live in a penthouse on an eighty-or-so-story building. Do you *really* think you know what’s going on down on the ground floor?”

“Yeah, of course I do, I only spend every damn night wandering around the city.”

“And what about the rest of Japan, the rest of the world?”

“Well, I... I don’t know! Look, I’m get it, I’m important, but if I do this now, I’ll have to stop going to school to work on it.”

“Oh please, you already only go when you feel like it. You’d have flunked out long ago if it weren’t for your name and you know it!”

“Okay now, you know I’m doing a lot better now. And I’m not fucking quitting, what would I do then?”

“Ryuko, you’re a *trillionaire*. Even with Satsuki bleeding your fortune as fast as she can sign checks you’ll be rich for the rest of your life. You don’t need to go to college, hell, you don’t even need to work. You should spending your time on something that’s actually useful.”

“Rich coming from the one who told me I should be majoring in fashion design.”

“Well, then go part time or something! It isn’t that you shouldn’t use you fashion skills, you would be using them. Look, you’re a good fashion designer but a terrible student, everyone knows it. So stop acting like everything revolves around you and do what you were born to do!”

Now Ryuko stood up, got in Rei’s face. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She growled.

“You never think about anything that’s beyond what you see. You have *no idea* how much you’d be helping, but you won’t just because you don’t want to!”

“Well maybe you could fucking *tell* me how much it helps. Or you can just keep being a whiny know-it-all. Your choice.”

“Well, I...” *I wouldn’t know where to begin.* Rei was sure the arms race thing wasn’t what upset Ryuko, she wasn’t that logical. How was she supposed to persuade her? Satsuki should’ve done this job, she wasn’t cut out for it. Ryuko started to storm off. *Wait, where are you going? Come back!* “Ryuko, look, if none of that matters to you, at least think of your friends. They’re all sacrificing so much, especially Satsuki. Did you know she gets almost no sleep these days? Just... think about how much it would help her, if you would do this. Ryuko? Wait, where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back. I think someone left the TV on.” Ryuko said with such a snarkily emphatic tone that told Rei neither of those things was true. *Fuck! No I’ve messed*



*it up! Dammit, what was I supposed to say!* Little did Rei know Ryuko was fleeing, knowing all too well she didn't have a comeback. Especially against that last part.

Ryuko did eventually return, maybe two hours later. Rei had laid down, accepting her defeat. She pretended she was still asleep until Ryuko laid down, forehead to forehead, and wrapped her arms around Rei's chest. She stirred a little bit, just enough to see Ryuko smile a little, push a string of frizzy brown hair behind her ear. They didn't resolve anything that night, but still, those arms pulled her closer until her face was practically nestled into Ryuko's breasts. They felt like absolution.

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Unbeknownst to Rei, there was another side to their typical arguments. Whenever things went unresolved for long enough, Ryuko would inevitably end up griping about it to Satsuki. She would ambush her older sister whenever she happened by the penthouse, ostensibly for a quick chat, but usually they ended up settling down for the length of a movie or TV episode and going on long, meandering conversations in which Ryuko would invariably spill the beans. Of course this didn't help things. Satsuki always took Ryuko's side, feeling a rush of wistful pride because she understood her dear sister better than her own *girlfriend*. And then Ryuko would only dig in her heels deeper. Except this time:

"Ah, I shoulda known you'd be keen on it too. But still, at least you don't make it personal. 'you never think about anything beyond yourself'," Ryuko misquoted Rei, gesturing with her hands, "I think that was way out of line."

"Mmm, I don't disagree," Satsuki said, but as much as she wanted that to be it, she could tell this was bothering Ryuko. Ryuko seemed to think Rei was very smart and supremely logical, admired it, in fact, and it didn't sit right with her that Rei had resorted to personal attacks. *I can't believe I'm doing this*, Satsuki thought as she spoke, "But I think she probably was a little frustrated."

"Hmm? How so?"

"Well, maybe you should try seeing things from her perspective," Satsuki said plainly. From Rei or almost anybody else, Ryuko might have taken offense to this. But not Satsuki, never Satsuki. They spoke their minds when they were together (well, maybe not everything on their minds).

"I mean, I thought I did. She thinks it would be useful if I helped. I disagree."

"Hmm," Satsuki hummed thoughtfully. "Has she ever told you about her past?"

Oh, shit. Ryuko sensed immediately that there was something she should have known. "I, uh, I never asked. Fuck, I probably should have," She said, throwing herself back against her pillow.

"Yes, I suppose you should have. But, she did give me permission to talk about it if I saw fit. She says its good to discuss it – what her psychiatrist told her."

“Really? Alright then. Lay it on me.”

Satsuki cleared her throat, “Rei was born in Somalia, a country in Africa that has been plagued by civil war and anarchy for as long as anyone can remember. When she was four, the civil war came to her village, mercenaries killed everyone except her, she hid. But her village was a secret test by REVOCS - the people there had high life-fiber compatibilities – and Ragyo came to collect her. So she grew up with me and with Nui. You can imagine what that was like.”

“Yeah...” Ryuko nodded, listening while at the same time lost in thought. She could see it now, and suddenly everything clicked and she understood all too well.

“Same brutal training I received, only worse, because she started hers even before I was born.”

“She has the, the same, uh -,”

“The scars?” Satsuki motioned to her back. Ryuko nodded. “It’s only now, as you know, that’s she’s finally free from all that. And if things had gone a little differently back then she wouldn’t be here now. She knows better than any of us what oppression and cruelty looks like – she’s felt being a starving child at the very bottom of the ladder. She really believes in what we’re doing now.”

“Yeah, yeah I know,” Ryuko sniffed

“She really enjoyed that night, you know that, right? I don’t think she ever had anything like that before. So I don’t think it’s too surprising that she wants to do anything necessary to protect her new life. And that she’d be frustrated that you aren’t doing everything you can to – oh! Ryuko? Are you okay?”

Ryuko looked up at her with glassy eyes. “Fuck. I’m such a jerk. I didn’t even - I shoulda asked.”

What? Oh no, Ryuko, you can’t cry. I didn’t mean that! “It’s not your fault, you didn’t know.”

“Yeah, but, I shoulda.”

“Are you alright? I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Satsuki said softly.

“S’okay,” Ryuko smiled thinly, wiped her eyes. She knew what she needed to do now. “Thankyou for telling me that.”

“Here, I’ll go get -,”

“- No no! It’s alright, really. I just need time to think about that.”

“Oh. Okay.” Satsuki stood to go. *This is a good thing*, she told herself. *Ryuko isn’t mine. My pain isn’t hers to feel. At least, she and Rei. This will be good for them.* She told herself these things over and over again.

As Satsuki was getting ready to leave, Ryuko looked up from her thoughts again.
“Hey, Sats?”

“Yes?”

They're all sacrificing so much, especially Satsuki. Did you know she gets almost no sleep these days?

“How've you been lately?” When Ryuko saw surprise on Satsuki's face, she laughed softly, “I know, I know I never ask, I'm sorry. Just as you're running out the door too.”

“No, it's alright.”

“Cuz, y'know, we all noticed you haven't been around as much lately. And I know it's not because you're mad at me, just you're really busy. But you're not *too* busy, right?”

Satsuki smiled, “I'm fine, really. Yes, I've been very busy, but things are going well.”

“No, but like – I mean, how are *you* doing?”

“Oh I'm alright. Really, it's been very helpful to have Rei around, she's really helped reduce my workload.” More time mope at home - when she should have been working on her dissertation - and wonder what had gone wrong that Rei could be reasonably happy and well adjusted just months after her release while she still felt like she was sleepwalking through everything.

“Alright, alright. I was just thinking, 'cuz we talk a lot about what I want outta life and stuff, and not ever about what you want. And I care, alright? I wanna make sure you're happy.”

Satsuki's heart could've burst, but she pulled up her bag and soldiered on, “I want to guarantee peace and prosperity for as many people as I can, for as long as I can. The best thing to want, I think.”

“Well, yeah, but that's not all you do, right?”

Satsuki shook her head. “But it's working. It'll just be a little longer now.”

“No, this is gonna last the rest of your life, isn't it?”

Satsuki shrugged. *Don't you dare cry again, not for me. Not your job.*

“Okay, well come around more often, okay? It was really fun hanging out with you that night, really.”

“I will. Take care, Ryuko.”

Fuck, everyone's got so many problems except me. Maybe I am self centered, Ryuko thought. But no matter. She knew what she had to do now. For Rei's and Satsuki's sakes.

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That night, the argument was still lingering unresolved like a bad taste in the mouth. Rei walked into the bathroom for her evening shower and found Ryuko already there, lounging in the vast bathtub, steam rising from the bubblers.

"Hey," Ryuko greeted her with a nod. Rei responded with a nonverbal grunt. "How was your day?"

"Fine."

"Care to join?"

"Didn't you say you had an essay due tomorrow?"

"Yeah, but I – wait, no, this is wrong. I will get it done. I was waiting for you, though."

"Oh?"

"Well yeah. I want to apologize."

*Oh, thank god!* Truth be told Rei was ready to put it behind her, but stubbornness kept her demeanor frosty. "You do?"

"Yeah, of course," Ryuko shot her a meaningful glance and, with the shape of her naked figure glimmering through the water, *God, wow, she's incredible.* Rei had started undressing, and she wasn't stopping now as Ryuko beckoned with her finger, "C'mon, I got some shit to say."

Rei went to dip her toes in and "Ah! Ryuko that's boiling!"

"Oh shit, yeah, sorry, human temperature ranges, right." She pressed a few buttons on the control panel to make the bubbler pipe in cold water, and turned the main faucet so it added some cold water. "Better?" She asked after a minute.

"Better." Rei managed to get one foot in, then the other, until she was sitting by Ryuko's side.

"Good, now I can do this shit properly." Ryuko took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for Saturday. I was being stupid and selfish and not thinking. I do that a lot. I didn't mean to upset you any, really."

"It's alright, really. I should really be apologizing to you."

"What? Nah."

“No, I’m serious. I wasn’t being respectful. I said some hurtful things I didn’t mean.”

“I don’t even remember it,” Ryuko put her arm over Rei’s shoulders, “Point is, you don’t gotta worry about that anymore. I’m gonna do it.”

Rei beamed, and Ryuko leaned in to kiss her. “Does that make it up?”

“You didn’t have to -,”

“But I am,” Another thing Ryuko was doing was slowly shifting until Rei was sitting between her legs. Having her on all sides was even more soothing than the warm waters of the bath, even if her body was like a hot water bottle. “You were right, and if you want to apologize for being mean, fine, but I won’t let you apologize for that.”

“You don’t get to tell me that!” Rei giggled.

“Oh? Well can I tell you that you’re gonna sit here with me for as long as I want, essay or not?” Ryuko wrapped a leg around Rei’s waist pulling her even tighter. She squirmed involuntarily; another, very different sort of heat was building inside her. It was almost uncomfortable, but in a situation like this she could never refuse Ryuko anything.

“M-maybe. But I’m gonna apologize anyway. Because it was wrong of me to try to force you to make such a big decision for my sake. I was just – mmm! I was just – stop that!”

“What?” Ryuko mumbled around Rei’s shoulderblade. “Mmm listenin’.”

“I had such a good time that night, I just wanted to protect that, but I forgot how much I already owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, don’t be stupid.”

“No, really. I wouldn’t know any of these wonderful people without you, I wouldn’t have tried so many amazing things without you. And I wonder, sometimes, why you would even choose me to begin with.”

“But I love sharing things with you.”

“But you could’ve picked someone – anyone else, and you chose me. I feel like I’m on my way to having friends, a family now. I-I’ve never really had anything like that before. And it’s because of you.”

“Yeah, that was me too, once. God, I feel that so hard.”

“Ryuko, I – I never felt a joy like that before you. I won’t ever forget again, I promise.”

“Oh, stop that, you’re gonna make me blush,” Ryuko grinned as his fingers curled possessively around Rei’s chin and neck, just how she liked. Meanwhile, the other was

creeping down past her navel. Rei could've protested that they weren't done talking yet, but that wasn't up to her to decide anymore (not that she minded that fact at all).

“Mmm, you're already blushing.”

“Am I? Oh dear, there's gonna have to be some reparations for that,” Ryuko said, and then, just as her hand reached its destination, drawing a breathy gasp from Rei, she said softly, almost whispering:

“I'll do what it takes to protect your joy, Rei. I promise you that. Whatever it takes.”

# In which Shiro gets deep

## Chapter Summary

Kind of a weird lore/science one, woohoo! Trying to build Shiro's character you inevitably run into having to include some weird sci-fi bullshit in your fanfic, because that's what he cares about. I'm sure it'll be up some of your alleys, others not so much. I like it, and it's important to the story so it's what you get. I will however take suggestions on whether chapters like this are interesting/important in the comments. If enough say that they'd rather just fill in the blanks later and focus on the main characters I'll try to do that going forward.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2066

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“You’re keeping an eye on the time, right?” Shiro said as he strode through automatic doors into the sewing chamber. Ryuko barely looked up from her work but did give him a wave of acknowledgement through the glass.

“Yeah dad,” She snarked, voice tinny though the loudspeaker. She was within the sewing chamber proper, where only she was permitted, amidst a swirling, tangling web of glowing red life fibers that wadded together in front of her into the embryonic beginnings of a Kamui. It looked like a discordant mess, and in previous times this would have been an outbreak that would probably have doomed the entire facility, but all of it was under Ryuko’s careful control via her “third arm”. She didn’t visualize it as a third arm anymore, or else she wouldn’t have been able to control it all. Rather, in her minds eye it was a mass of tentacles not too different from the life-fibers themselves, except that they were part of her. “Actually, Rei’s on it.”

“Twenty-seven minutes, forty-four seconds until next cycle,” Rei chirped from the plush executive chair in the middle of the observation chamber. The magnetic containment field around the sewing chamber was created by dozens of slowly rotating metal panels that extended from the ceiling and floor with a faint hum. They needed to be shut down for ten minutes of every hour or else they’d overheat, and they’d be useless. And the life-fibers got especially recalcitrant when you tried to make them into a bonded Kamui. Ryuko could’ve sworn they were doing it on purpose sometimes, trying to stop her from ripping them from the hivemind or whatever. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Very good,” Shiro nodded, “Although honestly I doubt we’ll need them for much longer. You haven’t tripped the alarms in a week or so.” It was true, Ryuko was getting a lot better. Since she didn’t bother to use her hands (although her fingernails had tiny corrugations in them like Nui’s so she could have in theory used them) she instead used them to mess around with a set of touch screens pumping her a mess of information. Of course, she didn’t know what any of it meant.

They’d all tried their best to teach her, first Houka and Shiro and then Aikuro and Tsumugu when they thought Ryuko could benefit from a less technical explanation. But you couldn’t teach theoretical physics to someone who couldn’t (or, more accurately, refused to) pass calculus. So the alternative was to color code everything and let Ryuko figure out how to keep the numbers in the green through trial and error. She was getting a lot better at that, enough that there was no point in having anyone use Shiro’s beloved robot arms to help her anymore.

There were some that looked like circuits, too, which represented how she should orient the life-fibers. Ryuko liked those. Circuits were puzzles, with enough tries she could figure them out. This could be a problem because when she tried and failed the life-fibers, which weren’t safe beings at the best of times, began to destabilize, often explosively. She’d had lots of tries, she’d been doing this for a couple months now, but she’d still scorched off several sets of floor tiles. This was probably the tenth or so now.

“Maybe one day I’ll be able to do this outside, huh?”

“In theory, but I’d really rather you not.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say something like that.” Ryuko really wasn’t a big fan of working underground; she’d already renovated her corner of the lab to be a little more homey with some paint, nicer tables and chairs, a couple pictures, but a little natural light would go a long way. “Oh, by the way, I could use for DNA juice when you get the chance. Treatment filaments are starting to get a little dry.”

“Of course. Er, which one are you working on right now?”

“Uzu’s.”

“Still going with the gi design?”

“Yup! I just thought, well, what else would be good for him?” This was the part Ryuko took most seriously. She’d measured, sketched, remeasured, sketched again. Half the computer screens in front of her were covered in paper. Once they achieved oneness, none of them would ever want to take their Kamui off again. If this was the one outfit they’d be wearing for the rest of their lives, that was their closest friend, their other half, it had to *be* them.

So a gi signified not just his mastery of Kendo but also dedication - to the old style of warrior honor (really more machismo than honor in her opinion) and to honing his craft. And, to a lesser extent, to Nonon – Ryuko knew him well enough to be surprised that he hadn’t so much as looked at another woman since they’d gone official (and to wonder if he wasn’t just scared of her temper). Add the color scheme, pale aqua with a deep blue-green hakama to

match his hair, a lively color scheme to match his own irrepressible energy. He was gonna love it. But as for what the powered-up form would look like, well, even she didn't know that. They'd have to wait and find out.

"Hmm, quite. Well, the banshi are coming well," Shiro said, sitting down in a less comfy chair than Rei's and putting his slender feet up on a desk. Ryuko nodded – that was all she'd gotten done so far. It didn't look much like a gi yet, really it looked like nothing more than a rigid fishing net. But this was the most important part, the banshi, the core threads that would hold the whole thing together. They were also the ones that had to be treated with a special solution synthesized from Uzu's blood that Ryuko lovingly referred to as "DNA juice". She had few trays filled with a special filament, a plastic membrane that she ran the fibers through to get them immersed in it – she had no idea how it worked. But after that the life-fibers got even more recalcitrant as they reacted to the organic presence invading their purity, so she only did that step at the last possible moment. But it had to be done, that was the step that bonded the Kamui to him, made it sentient, made it his perfect other half.

"Oh, you're staying?"

"Mmmm, yeah, sorry to interrupt."

"Oh, no, it's fine, we're just working," Rei gestured to the piles of paperwork in front of her and Ryuko nodded. Rei was her most frequent companion, but basically everyone who was allowed into the secret lab occasionally came down to keep her company. Satsuki was her second most common visitor, but never at the same time as Rei.

"Good, good," Shiro sighed, "I just can't be around the others today. They think they're gonna make a breakthrough on the REVOCS code real soon. Even Houka's freaking out."

"And you don't care?"

"The code isn't really a concern of mine," Shiro shrugged, digging his hands into his corduroy pockets (when left to his own devices he dressed like an old man). "It will get done in due time."

"But you care about what the damn book says," Ryuko pointed out.

"Now *that* is my business. I am looking forward to reading it, even if most of Nui's projects aren't things we could *ethically* replicate. But I'm no linguist, I'd just be slowing Houka down."

"Well hey man if you want to chill here feel free. Y'know I think everything's too uptight around here anyway."

Shiro chuckled, "Well then, with your permission," He pulled out a bag from his back pocket, "I must admit I expected you'd be okay with this." Ryuko gave a start when she saw what was in it. A sophisticated, techy looking marijuana-pen, custom built by Shiro himself.

"Holy shit dude I didn't know you smoked!" Ryuko said with a laugh, "You jerk, and you never told me?"

“Well I drink, so why not? Houka actually introduced me to it – after Honnouji, of course. He was a pretty big deal in the Tokyo criminal scene way back when, you know. The wonder-kid, only one who ever cracked the Kiryuin Conglomerate servers. His services were in high demand, and I won’t lie, he wasn’t above the vices that go with that lifestyle,” Shiro explained as he popped the THC oil cartridge in.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I wonder what they thought happened to him after he got recruited.”

“Probably figured one of his many enemies got to him.”

“Which is technically true,” Rei pointed out.

“Quite. Oh! Where are my manners!” He extended an offering hand to Rei, “If you want any, it’s all yours. I’ve modified it myself, taken all the bad chemicals out.”

“Oooh! Can I -,” Ryuko asked.

“Mmhmhaha *No*. One wrong twitch and we have to replace the floor tiles again. You’re staying focused.”

“Damn, fair,” Ryuko shrugged, “Well then, Rei?” She held up a hand that communicated “go ahead then”.

“Yeah, y’know what, sure,” Rei, with Ryuko’s invitation, pushed down the thought that she should keep working, “I’ve only even smoked a couple times with Ryuko, but if you believe it or not its... pretty soft compared to some of the stuff I’ve been exposed to.”

“Yeuch,” Ryuko grimaced, “I don’t want to, but I do.” Since Ryuko agreed to work on the Kamui Project, she and Rei had been talking about her past a lot more. It helped, a lot, and with every telling Rei felt like some new horror she’d never come to terms with was put to bed. It reminded her it was all over, and that she had a relatively normal life now.

“Don’t worry, this is as hard as I’m gonna go. Well, cheers!” Shiro said, passing the pen over to her.

“Oh that’s as hard as she’ll go, but you’ll make me take heroin.”

“You made her take heroin!” Rei exclaimed, messing up her pull and devolving into a coughing fit.

“It was a test! She was fine!” Shiro held up his hands defensively, “Geez, you’re not gonna let that go, huh?”

“Well, you didn’t even let me keep it in my system long enough to feel it,” Ryuko shot back with a grin, “Not like it would’ve hurt me or anything.”

“You’re hopeless Ryuko.”

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“No, I see the problem as being human nature itself,” Rei blurted quickly, and Shiro nodded just as quickly. Twenty-seven minutes and forty-four seconds after Shiro had first come into the observation chamber, and *what are they even talking about anymore*, Ryuko thought as the magnetic containment fields spun down. Rei went on, “Look, humans are animals, we evolved on this planet. So we have a set of instincts that are adapted to help us survive and propagate our genes. Survive and propagate them as tribal hunter-gatherers, not civilized people. Even the most intelligent of us are beholden to things they can’t control. And that leads to all the short sight, greedy, wasteful behavior that’s dooming us. You should take notes, by the way, this is primo core REVOCS philosophy. I agree with the general premise, but obviously not the interpretation.”

“Mmm, and I don’t disagree with any of that.”

“Well then you see that these things are hard coded *in* the genes, so even if you remove everything that caused their evolution, the people you make immortal will still act according to those genes, which will make even less sense then than it does now. Like, the biological impulse to breed, that could be a real problem if they just keep reproducing until the world just, y’know, fills up. Actually hold on, we’ve got Ryuko right here, we can just ask her. Hey, Ryuko, dear?”

“Yeah?” Ryuko was a little puzzled. Rei almost never used pet names.

“You want to have kids someday, right?”

“Wha – I – don’t you think it’s a little early to talk about that?”

“I dunno,” Rei shrugged, “I mean, I do.” That made Ryuko a little angry, or maybe a little jealous. *How do you just know something like that so easily?*

“Eh, I guess my main problem is more that I don’t think I’d be a good mother. Seriously though what the fuck are you guys talking about?”

“You see?” Rei turned to Shiro, “She still has the impulse to reproduce!”

“Hmm, well, I’m not so sure, and I’ll tell you why I’m not so sure,” Shiro shot back, as animated as she’d ever seen him. It looked like a friendly debate, but you honestly could never tell with him. “The entire Honnouji Academy was essentially an experiment in stimulus response. And what we found was that, with the proper conditioning, those instincts can be almost completely overwritten. The data backs that up – it’s what Satsuki is writing her dissertation on.”

“Right, but that’s assuming you can control the stimulus, which – when you’re talking about the strongest creature on Earth, I dunno, I feel like you couldn’t control that.”

“But that’s the genius of it! Their bodies themselves would be the stimulus! They wouldn’t need to construct any buildings, agriculture, transportation, nothing besides entertainment because none of that would make their lives more comfortable– they’d be like the hunter-gatherers of old.”

“Ok, sure, mayyybe,” Rei said skeptically, “But how far would they go for the sake of entertainment over all of eternity?”

“Well, come on, do you really think the hybrids-,”

“-Aha! I knew it! You are talking about the hybrid project!” Ryuko said accusatorially as she opened the door into the observation chamber.

“Aah! You got us!” Rei said cheerily, obvious feeling the weed-pen’s effects. But then she saw that Ryuko wasn’t smiling, and her face fell. “It’s just for academic interest, Ryuko.”

“Yeah, well it’s my break, so that’s enough of that.”

“You know, Ryuko you should really -,” Shiro started.

“Nope! My break, my room, we can talk about anything *except* that, alright? Now Shiro, c’mon, let me have a hit.”

“You’ve got to go back to work in ten minutes, you know.”

“Oh I’ll sober up, whatever. Now, let’s talk about literally anything else.”

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Ten minutes later and Ryuko was back to work, only this time Shiro stuck around to keep chatting.

“By the way Ryuko, do you remember those odd bullets that the REVOCS troopers fired at you? I never told you what those were, did I?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

“Here, I’ll send a schematic to your screen... got that?”

“Yeah. Ohh, so it is a bullet with life fibers in it, huh?” Ryuko said, examining what looked like a 50 cal. slug made out of tightly corded life-fibers with a metal casing.

“Essentially. This is a starching round, think of it like a souped-up jamming needle. The life-fibers in it are primed to resonate at a certain rate and when they contact with other life-fibers they spread this resonance, and that causes interruption to their isostatic equilibrium, disabling them. Same premise as Nonon’s sound beams, actually. They were designed to combat extremely powerful life-fiber beings such as hybrids and Kamuis.”

“Hmm. Makes sense. So, what woulda happened if one hit me?”

“Well, I’m not sure. It’s never been tested. Could do anything from absolutely nothing to temporarily paralyzing you to just straight-up killing you. My money’s on paralysis, but best thing I can tell you is to just not get hit.”

“Noted. Wasn’t planning on it anyway.”

“With your reflexes you’d have to get extremely unlucky, or careless, to even risk it.”

“Mhm! But that makes me think, are there any other, like, bullshit technologies that are designed to fight creatures like me I should know about?”

“Well, there is one, here, I’ll show you.”

A new tab popped up on Ryuko’s screen showing a complex molecular structure – a 3d matrix of carbon rings and symbols Ryuko didn’t know. “Uhh…”

“It’s a serum we found in your father’s notes. It disrupts your organic cells ability to respond to life fibers, temporarily making you behave, for all intents and purposes, like a normal human.”

“I see. And has this ever been tested?” Ryuko asked, but Shiro didn’t immediately answer. He looked very confused. “He tested it on me, didn’t he?”

“More than tested it. Do you remember that he took you out of school every so often for ‘innoculations’?”

Ryuko’s head was suddenly spinning. “... I thought those were vaccines.”

“Every four months? He was actively suppressing your powers, Ryuko, to keep Ragyo from finding you before you were ready”

“Damn. Y’know, it did always make me feel really sick,” Ryuko had always hated those trips, but then they were the only time she got to see her father besides when he was transferring her to another school (and he was in a worse mood than normal then). When she was young, Kinue would also be there to take care of her afterwards, make her hot chocolate, read her a story. Then one time when Ryuko was about eight Kinue was gone, and Soichiro wouldn’t answer when she asked where she went. The Matoi mansion seemed a little darker after that.

“Well, that’s to be expected, considering that half of your biology was nonfunctioning.”

“Hold on,” Rei cut in, “So what was his plan, then? I guess to let it wear off eventually, right?”

“According to Aikuro the original plan was to, when Ryuko turned eighteen, to give her Senketsu and the scissor blades and the antidote to the serum and send her off just like that,” Shiro snapped his fingers illustratively. *Fuckin yeah right I would have just gone along with that*, Ryuko thought angrily, *Typical dad, as if I never had a thought of my own*. “But as she matured and started to exhibit certain... aggressive behaviors, they didn’t think she’d go along with that. So Soichiro decided that he would allow Ragyo to catch up with him and send Nui to kill him. Somehow he anticipated that Nui would fuck it up and that you would arrive when you did, even Satsuki wouldn’t be able to mastermind something like that so...,” He shrugged, and was about to go on when Ryuko interrupted him.

“Fucking asshole! You’re serious, he really did that?” She seethed.

“Well, as far as I know.”

“What the *fuck*. I can’t believe him!”

“Ryuko? Are you alright?” Rei asked, with evident concern that made Ryuko immediately aware of the distraught expression on her face. And that she had to reign it in or else she might accidentally slip her grip on the life-fibers. And yeah, no big deal, it was all ancient history.

Except that her own thoughts had just proved that he’d been right. If only she’d been good, just a little bit less herself, he would be alive. And yeah, everything had worked out in the end, but what kind of cruel shit was this? He should have been alive, people would be saying that thanks to his inventions he saved the world as much as anyone else, but instead barely anybody even knew who he was.

And it would have been easier if Ryuko could just believe that he really was just a cold bastard, and that he was completely in the wrong to assume she couldn’t be trusted to do the right thing. But there was no way she could accept that.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Ryuko smiled, “Doesn’t make any sense, but whatever, I guess it worked out. Just makes me wonder what other shit he never told me.”

“You know, you really ought to read some of your fathers notes,” Shrio said, “Maybe I’ll edit them down so that you just have the annotations, and not the actual technical shit.”

“Yeah, yeah I’d like that. Oh, but go on with your story, it’s good to know how it worked.”

“Alright, sure. So, during the time you spent wandering around, the serum slowly wore off. By the time you got to Honnouji you were able to fight off several one-star students at once without Senketsu, do you remember that?”

“Oh yeah. Heh, I figured those were just normal guys at that point, didn’t even think anything of it.”

“And then during the tri-city raid you took down dozens of our soldiers at once. It probably would’ve taken you a couple months or so more to fully awaken, but Ragyo forced your hand. Ripping your heart out forced the life-fibers in you to... overwhelm the serum to save your life, so to speak, but that seems to have been what brought on the coma.”

“Hmm, makes sense, might explain the berserker outbreak after you woke up too,” Rei nodded.

“Err, that was all me, actually,” Ryuko said with a small sheepish smile.

“Oh.”

“Well, in either case it’s interesting to me because, if you hadn’t ever been given the serum, you probably would have awakened naturally over the course of the first year or so of your life.”

“And that’s interesting to you because...,” Ryuko said leadingly.

“... Well...,”

“... Because it’s good for the hybrid project, isn’t that why?” Ryuko finished the thought, “That your hybrid babies won’t go nuts and wreck a city whenever they first awaken.”

“You can’t tell me that isn’t a good thing.”

“I didn’t say that,” Ryuko said tersely, leaving the “*but I did say I didn’t want to talk about this*” unsaid.

Shiro sighed, “Sorry, I’ll stop now.”

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He tried again twenty or so minutes later. By that point he and Rei were well and truly high, and lost in bizarre tangent about what would be the most dangerous natural disaster to surf on, which somehow evolved out of the question of if you could ride an earthquake, and devolved into just listing as many natural disasters as they could. It was weird. *God, they’re such giant nerds. It’s cool though, at least nerds care about things.*

“Maybe one day I’ll try surfing a Tsunami,” Ryuko chimed in “Reckon I could survive it. Of course, I’d have to learn to surf, first.”

“Plus, you’d have to find a tsunami too,” Shiro was talking *really* fast now. Ryuko’d never seen him like this before, it was as if whatever discipline he usually used to force down his enthusiasm and maintain his usual stoicism was just gone, “And they don’t come along just every day you know we still actually can’t predict them so you’d have to just be in the right place at the right time and that’s just waiting and hoping. But that reminds me, and I know you don’t want to hear it, but there is something you should really think about.”

“Mmm... Alright, I’ll bite, what?”

“Well, you’re immortal, you know that?”

“This again? Ech!” Ryuko made a disgusted noise in her frustration.

“No no no no hear me out! So, we’ve been doing scans on you since your first checkup, right, and at this point I can say with 99% confidence that you aren’t aging. Period. You’re gonna look like that for forever. Literally forever, you have no idea what that means.”

“Shit. I kinda suspected. So what, I guess I gotta figure out what I’m gonna do about that, right?” Ryuko hadn’t felt that sense of dread when thinking about her future in a

while, but considering that, no matter how far she planned into the future, she'd probably never settle down and say "*I've made it, I'm home*" did give her something close,

"Precisely. Well, not like there's much you can do, really. You either take yourself out, a la Raygo, or you just... keep on living. Well, you know I'd suggest staying alive."

"Yeah, same, I wasn't planning on going anywhere."

Ryuko, do you have any idea what it will be like to live *millions* or years?"

"Well, a little?"

"Inevitably you'll outlive the human species – I know, we fought so hard to save it, but no species lasts forever. And then it will just be you and the world. Mountains will rise and fall before your very eyes, oceans come and go, even the continents will slide around until the very surface of the Earth is unrecognizable. And the *animals* Ryuko - you'll live to see evolution in action, and who knows what it will all look like! As a scientist, I'm really, truly jealous – there could be nothing more fascinating."

"Dude, calm down, you're freaking her out," Rei put a hand on his shoulder – Shiro was getting quite heated, waving his hands all around.

"Huh? Nah, I'm just thinking," Which was true enough, but that didn't mean it wasn't freaky. Shiro might be excited, but he'd glossed over something important. *Everyone I know will grow old and die, and I'll still be here.* Even Satsuki – God no, not Satsuki – would be reduced to a feeble old woman, nothing of her old strength left, and Ryuko would be there at her deathbed as unchanging as a statue.

And if she had children. She could see it now, and realized immediately why she'd avoided thinking about this until now. *By the time they went to college I'd look like their sister; not their Mom. By the time they were getting married, I'd be like their daughter; or maybe a little cousin. And when they were old and retired – at their funerals...*

Ryuko realized then she could never have children. To have to live your life with this timeless, ever-youthful being as your mother; it just wasn't right. And she couldn't possibly bear watching them wither and die just like every one else.

"Fuck dude, it's too goddamn crazy to even think about. Like, I don't know what I'd do for a million years."

"A million years will be like a day, no, an hour, compared to how long you'll live," Shiro said enthusiastically. Ryuko could feel her heart in her chest. She was very careful not to look at Shiro, focus on her work. She knew he didn't mean it, he was just a passionate weirdo, but still, he always said the most goddamn disturbing shit.

"Yeah, even worse. I feel like, I dunno, I'd just go crazy from the boredom."

"For your sake, I sincerely hope you find something better to do. I know I would, hell, I might even try going to other planets eventually. The existence of life-fibers alone



confirms that there must be alien life on other planets. You could find them, destroy their primordial life-fibers, save them. You'd be like a god to them."

"Oho no! Enough people think I'm a god here on Earth."

"Hmm, fair enough. Ooh, or maybe one day humanity will regress into some primate state and they'll revere you as a god, build temples to you, virgin sacrifices, all that good shit," Shiro chuckled when he saw the look on Ryuko's face, "Heh, I'm just messing with you, don't worry."

"Honestly, trouble is with the way people are these days that might not be as far off as you think."

"There's always some madness in the world, whenever humans are involved. It's interesting to watch, even if it's not exactly *sustainable*." Ryuko didn't really pay any mind to the fact that Shiro wasn't talking about himself as a human. He usually did that. She saw what Aikuro mean when he said Shiro didn't seem very fond of humanity.

"Yeah, and that's why I'm so worried that, if I'm gonna be around when all the rest of you are gone, I'll just go crazy."

"And *that* is why I'm so confused, Ryuko, that you don't approve of the hybrid project. Because you don't have to be alone with the world forever."

"You're not wrong, but like, is that enough to justify it?"

"I don't know, I think it is. I mean, isn't that something you want? Someone to share eternity with?"

## Chapter End Notes

Fair warning, this is kind of a busy week coming up for me. I don't know exactly when I'll be able to get the next chapter done. But it will be done as fast as I can. Also it will feature Mataro, Ryuko, Satsuki, and a little Uzu

# Part 1 of: In which Ryuko intervenes for Mataro

## Chapter Summary

Returning to the Mataro training subplot, this time seeing how he's interacting with some of the other characters. If I establish something like Mataro training in a subplot then don't mention it for a while, its safe to assume it's going along just fine until I mention otherwise.

## Chapter Notes

Things IRL have been pretty busy, so I'm gonna post the first half of this one now and try to get the other up by later this work-week. No promises on that, but I should be able to post another full chapter next weekend.

May 2066

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Ryuko was out in Tsumugu's backyard warming up for a casual martial arts practice when Mataro stumbled through the wooden gate. He was late, not typical for him, especially because the Kinagase residence was in the outskirts of Yokohama, not too far from Mataro's home. Tsumugu hopped off the practice mat to chastise him but stopped and did a double take when he saw the state of him.

"Bro! Are you alright?" Ryuko wasn't far after him, dashing over to catch her brother before he fell. She had to ask, but truth be told it was obvious Mataro was badly hurt. Knotty purple bruises were rising in bands on his arms and legs, his lips were split in two places, and a thin trail of dried blood trickled down from his scalp. But he'd kept his sweat-stained, bloodstained blindfold on.

"Heeyyy sis... it's fine, I'll be good in a minute."

"Sorry bro, not falling for that one again," Ryuko shook her head as she threw an arm over his shoulder and helped him to sit down on a lawn chair.

"Here, Ryuko go help Aoi get him some water and bandages," Tsumugu crouched down next to him and Ryuko nodded and was off, "How're you feelin' little guy?"

“...Fine, I told you. I just need a sec to rest,” Mataro rasped irritably, and slowly. Tsumugu frowned in concern - he was well versed in first aid, and this was definitely concerning. “You can keep practicing without me.”

“We’re not practicing anymore. Do you feel dizzy? Nauseous? Dazed? Is there a ringing in your ears?”

“... Yeah, I know...”

“No, but how do you feel?”

“Fine, fine, geez! Mataro tried to shove him away halfheartedly.

“Hmm. This isn’t good. I think you might have a concussion, let me take a look at your eyes.”

“No!” Mataro shouted, throwing his hands up to his blindfold and pinning it to his face. Undeterred, Tsumugu whipped out his phone and held the flashlight right up to Mataro’s eye, peering through the blindfold with its luminance. “AHH!! The fuck man!”

“No, not good at all,” Tsumugu concluded, standing up as Ryuko and Aoi hurried out of the house. Aoi gasped when she saw Mataro’s injuries and quickly rushed over to help. A stern young woman – once a soldier – whose only concession to frivolity was the thin turquoise band she’d dyed in her hair, she wasn’t the most maternal woman but she knew Mataro well and could tell he was in poor shape.

“Ugh, what have your crazy friends done to him this time?” She jabbed at Tsumugu and Ryuko as she worked

“... ‘s mostly my fault. Too slow,” Mataro grunted as she pinned his head back and washed the blood off.

“Hold still. Drink some water. We’ll call your parents, get you home, okay?”

The three of them doted on Mataro for a few minutes until he seemed to be calmed down and half-asleep. “Satsuki’s gone too far this time,” Tsumugu reflected, and Ryuko nodded – at this time of the early afternoon Mataro was coming from his practice at Uzu’s dojo, usually with a few bruises but never before this bad. “You’ll talk to her about this, won’t you?”

“... Yeah... I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

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“... Y’know, I was really pissed off when you didn’t tell me Nonon had gotten Saiban.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry,” Ryuko sighed, sitting up in her lawnchair next to him. When Mataro got relaxed, Tsumugu and Aoi had gone inside, and Ryuko thought he’d gone

to sleep waiting for Sukoyo to come pick him up. “We all just got caught up in the moment, I guess.”

“Eh, none of the others were gonna, you know that.”

“No, probably not.”

“They don’t take me seriously.”

“Ah, sure they do, you’re just -,”

“- Young?”

“Well...”

“Nah, it’s like – you’re gonna make a Kamui for your *girlfriend*, right?” He spat derisively

“Probably.”

“Which, like, ‘s fair and all, I’m sure she’s a good fighter and she’s supposed to be very compatible. But she’s only been part of the group for like half a year tops, and I’m like – hello? I’m right here! I’ve been here the whole time!”

Ryuko looked over at Mataro. He had the back of his hand over his forehead. “You don’t like her, do you?”

“... No, I guess not. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Ryuko sighed through her nose. “That’s alright. You don’t hafta,” She said softly. Not everyone was gonna get along – Rei and Satsuki didn’t seem to be too good of friends either, even though they worked so closely together (*or maybe because of that*, Ryuko thought). Everybody else in the group had embraced her, even Nonon, so it wasn’t a huge blow.

But it did trouble Ryuko just a little. She’d brought Rei to visit Mataro and the parents once, and they all seemed very welcoming even though Rei had been shy and occasionally a bit of a lecturer (a habit Ryuko had learned to just ignore, as if it made it any better). But she was still missing a Mankanshoku’s seal of approval, and that meant something. Was there something about her that Ryuko had missed? *No, don’t be absurd*, Ryuko reassured herself, pushing away the irrational worries, *they’re just very different people is all*.

“She’s never gonna let me do it, is she?”

“I don’t know bro... I’m sorry, I tried my best.”

“I mean, it isn’t your fault. You don’t decide these things. But I dunno... at first, I thought she was like, y’know, testing me, then humoring me, and now she just, y’know, pummels me. I thought she was trying to get me to give up, but honestly I can’t tell if she cares about that anymore.”

“Satsuki? Nah, she’s just...,” Ryuko trailed off, failing to think of the explanation for this. She knew Mataro was right, Satsuki’s bouts with him had become more brutal lately. But there had to be a reason.

“...I can tell these things now. Sometimes shingantsu works, not always, but I’m getting better. Which she never *acknowledges*, but whatever. It’s like she’s taking something out on me, I don’t know.”

*I want to guarantee peace and prosperity for as many people as I can, for as long as I can. The best thing to want, I think ... it’s working. It’ll just be a little longer now.*

“Ah what the hell,” Ryuko shook her head, trying not to think about that exchange with Satsuki. Satsuki could handle anything, she wouldn’t use her adopted brother as a stress relief, right? “Do you think it’s about you dropping out of high school?” The parents had been upset by that, of course (although they hadn’t gotten this far by forcing their kids to play it safe so why start now?), it made sense Satsuki would be too.

“I never told her that.”

“Well that only makes it worse, she has her ways of finding these things out.”

“Hmm. Maybe. But let me tell you, if she is trying to get me to quit, it’s working. Like, I at least thought even if they never let me have a Kamui I’d learn how to do all the cool shit you guys do. But it hasn’t gotten me anywhere yet, and now,” He sighed, “Now I don’t know if I made the right choice dropping out but I *can’t* go back to school. I dunno... does she think I want it for the wrong reasons? I just want to be part of your little group, but that’s probably not gonna happen.”

Ryuko looked at her feet, too guilty to look at Mataro at that point. How long had it been since they’d sat around bullshitting? Since they’d played VR together? Hell, since he’d tried to peep on her changing? Maybe she shouldn’t have gone away to college after all. Affluence had torn apart the Mankanshoku family again. *It’s just like back with the whole stupid fight club, except this time I’m not the one feeling lonely.*

“She just wants to keep you safe, is all,” Ryuko finally said. “What we do is pretty dangerous, you can’t argue with that.”

“Yeah? Well she’s got an odd way of showing it.”

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That evening, Satsuki was working through dinner in the cramped, cozy den of what was once the Kiryuin Manor’s gardener’s house when her phone buzzed. When she saw it was a message from Ryuko she smiled even though there was no one around to see it. But her heart sunk when she read it.

Hey*I just wanted to tell you what you did to Mataro today was not cool

It’s combat practice, sometimes injuries happen.

not to be rudeBut no**do you know you gave him a concussion?** That took Satsuki by surprise. She set her chopsticks down and began typing in earnest.

Oh dear, I did?I'm sorry, I didn't realize**I'll have to make it up to him, maybe take him to get lunch?**

I don't think he'd like thatHe's keeping to a very strict diet**

Then maybe a new VR game?

Can't play them with the blindfold

Right. I knew that. **Haha I'm sorry Satsuki hesitated a moment before sending that one. Was it too artificial sounding? And Ryuko did seem pretty upset, maybe this wasn't a laughing matter. Reading what people meant from texts was so hard.

Ryuko also took a moment to respond **I think he'd like to hear that from you**

That I'm sorry? I'll do so, gladly.

GoodHe thinks you have something out for him, you know that?**Like you're using him as a punching bag to relieve your stress** Satsuki didn't know how to respond to that one. She waited so long thinking that Ryuko eventually sent her a **You still there?** message.

I thought I made the purpose of our practice clear to him She finally sent **I'm merely testing whether he has the requisite ability to achieve his stated goal of wearing a Kamui. **I may need to make that clear again, but I can assure you I'm not using him as a punching bag.** at least, she thought she wasn't.

Ok butYou need to take it easy on him**Seriously, he's not made of steel**

That would defeat the purposeI'll be more careful of his head when he is well enough to practice again.**

I guess that's a startThanks** Ryuko didn't send a message for a long time, long enough that Satsuki thought they were done. But then, **But you are gonna let him have a Kamui eventually, right?**

If he reaches my standards

Your standards seem pretty unreachable to me

We've discussed this beforeIf Mataro should ever wear a Kamui it's for his own safety that he be the best of the best**I know you want that for him to**

Sure I doIt just makes me think about what you said about the training you and Rei went through**Do you really have to be so brutal?**

Satsuki sighed to herself. If only she could ease up, but that would be the same as letting him die. And at this point she almost didn't even want to, although she didn't admit that to herself. She was in absolute control in the dojo in a way she couldn't be in the real world anymore. **I don't mean to belittle you Ryuko, but I have never heard of another way to become the best. It requires pain. He knew this**

We'll see

What's that supposed to mean?

It means when he's back on his feet I'm coming into the dojo with himAnd we'll try to find another way**

Is that a challenge? Satsuki asked, legitimately unsure as she struggled to read the tone. She thought that last part might have been conciliatory, but maybe that's just what she wanted to hear. She didn't want Ryuko angry with her – nothing could be worse. But yet, it had been so long since they'd fought together.

If I say yes will you bring your A-game?

You know me RyukoI don't turn down challenges**

Then consider yourself challengedAight I'll let you get back to work**Nite**

Goodnight RyukoI look forward to sparring with you again**

Part 2 of: In which Ryuko intervenes for Mataro

Chapter Summary

Sorry it's late, real life can really get you sometimes.

One minuscule step closer to finally giving you what it says in the tags. And Mataro and Uzu get some wins too, which is cool.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2066

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Satsuki well remembered that Ryuko was the type to fulfill her promises, after the clubbing incident she wouldn't make that mistake again – *how is it that that was more than half a year ago? Fifteen years of my life spent anxiously counting every day and now... it just slips away* – so when Mataro was ready to return to his routine after a week and a half or so she knew Ryuko was coming with. And she was sure she was ready.

“So you have returned Mankanshoku! It seems you really are hopelessly naïve,” Satsuki channeled her old self with practiced ease, putting equal parts venom and the impassivity of an absolute authority unconcerned with the thoughts and feelings of her subjects

“Hey Sats,” Ryuko called lazily as she followed a nervous Mataro into the dojo, seemingly unaware of the miniature drama playing out in front of her as Mataro steeled himself for more abuse, then frowned in puzzlement when Satsuki's stern face suddenly softened into a gentle smile. She was watching, sure, but mostly just Satsuki – specifically how she wore her gi with its faded hakama and her hair up in a careful topknot that further accentuated that absurdly graceful neck. Mental images for later, her little secret.

“Hello Ryuk-hup!” Satsuki cut herself off abruptly, realizing that she had accidentally shifted into the same familiar tone she might have greeted Ryuko with any ordinary day at the penthouse. Ryuko realized then what she had done and mouthed “sorry” over Mataro's head.

“Hey! Now why does she get to be called by her first name?” Mataro asked accusingly. With Ryuko here Satsuki wouldn't hit him just for questioning her, right?”

“- Ahem! Because she is worthy of such familiarity! She wore a Kamui herself, if you do not recall. Compared to achieving such heights, lineage means nothing, whereas you



are little more than the latest in a long line of utterly ordinary Mankanshokus!” A stopgap answer, nonsense really, and she didn’t believe it. But she never admitted error, not here, even if that meant making rules up on the fly (to be honest, she’d made up plenty of rules on the fly at Honoujji as well, although it was likely only Nonon, Shiro, and Soroi knew that). She watched Ryuko carefully, reading disapproval there. Her heart sunk as she saw for herself that Ryuko was indeed serious. Discomfort rumbled under her serene face – this felt like Honnouji in miniature.

At this point Uzu came out of a side room and also greeted Ryuko with a much more casual greeting than Satsuki would’ve liked. He spent a moment basking in Ryuko’s praise for what he had done with the place, which had been renovated even further than when he’d first taken possession of it.

“So, what brings you down here?” He finally asked (meanwhile Mataro had gone into the changing room to switch into his gi).

“Ah, I’m just here to chew Sats out for knocking Mataro’s brains out.”

“Oh. So, you’re not -,”

“ – No doofus I’m obvious gonna fight!” A relieved smile crossed Uzu’s face, “What, you think I’m gonna come all the way here and not?”

“Hell yeah. Hey, you guys wanna do doubles then? It’s been a while.”

“I have no objection,” Satsuki nodded.

“Sure, but I wanna get a crack at Sats, and all three of you, one-on-one.”

“Yeah for sure, I mean we’ve got like five hours until we open for regular classes so go nuts. Ah, here we go!” Uzu waved Mataro over as he left the changing room, still tying his belt. He left his blindfold exactly how it had been, just to show he hadn’t taken it off while out of sight.

“Alright, we ready to roll?” Ryuko asked as Mataro came over and bowed to them.

“Dressed like that? I think not!” Satsuki gestured to Ryuko fiercely, trying to make up for her previous failings. Ryuko was dressed in her normal human-level workout clothes: a sports bra with a black and white pattern and very short athletic shorts that didn’t even extend past the long, skintight underwear beneath. *What’s even the point of it?* Satsuki had to wonder, *Besides as a distraction, of course.*

It wasn’t a challenge to Satsuki’s composure, even though something kept trying to drag her eyes back down to her sister’s exposed skin, but her thoughts were a different story. She’d seen plenty of other women wearing the same thing, seen Ryuko wearing much, much less, so why did this outfit make her chest burn particularly tightly? It must have been the way it framed her curves so well, or the whole identity it embodied from social media models and the like.

She felt gross. A good reminder of why Ryuko had to be kept at arm's length.

"Aw c'mon, really? It's more than I usually wear when I fight," Ryuko grumbled.

"I'm sorry Ryuko, but in a Kendo dojo even you must respect the traditions of the sport."

"But we aren't even gonna play by the rules!"

"Be that as it may, proper decorum must be observed." Ryuko scoffed again. *Why must you make this so difficult? I just want to reassert order after you came in here and threw everything out of whack.* They both turned to Uzu as the final arbitrator. It was his dojo after all.

He looked Ryuko up and down appraisingly, with the grin he always wore when he was about to say something crude. "I'll allow it," he declared. Ryuko frowned.

"Okay I'm telling Nonon about that one," Ryuko said.

"You wouldn't dare," Uzu's face was suddenly much more serious. He and Ryuko had a little staring contest for a moment before they both broke down into laughter. "Alright, alright, I'll go get you a spare gi."

A crisp new gi was delivered to Ryuko and she vanished into the women's changing room. She was in there a moment, long enough that Uzu started putting Mataro through his usual warmup exercises. But then she emerged, uncertain look on her face and jacket loosely flung around her shoulders. "Hey uh, Sats? How d'ya put this thing on?"

And so began perhaps the most uncomfortable five minutes either Satsuki or Ryuko had experienced since the end of the war.

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She has to be doing this on purpose, Satsuki thought, then immediately countered herself, no, it's hard to put one of these on for the first time, I've just forgotten since I've been wearing them since I was four. But still, she's making one for Uzu right now! Well, a Kamui in the shape of one, if that matters, I don't see why it would. But why would she be doing it? She can't possibly know how much this torments me.

But it did torment her. She could practically feel the heat off Ryuko's body. Her lips, pursed in concentration, so dainty, so close. Was she wearing a subtle lipstick? She never used to wear makeup. Satsuki reached down for the jacket's drawstrings, and in so doing brushed the tips of her fingers against the soft skin right above Ryuko's waistline. Her hand quaked involuntarily.

"You good Sats?"

"This isn't particularly difficult, you know. I'm sure you could have figured it out if you'd tried," Satsuki ignored the question.

“Yeah, probably. But I didn’t wanna get it wrong and mess up your discipline. I already messed it up once – which I’m sorry about, by the way.”

“Oh it’s fine, not like I ever told you about it – here, this part’s just a knot you can do that yourself – I just try to make sure her understands -,”

“- No I get it. He’s gotta take it seriously.”

“Hmm, and here I thought you’d come to overthrow my little system,” Satsuki said, deliberately using the word overthrow to call back to Honoujji.

“Well yeah, but I’m gonna do it fair and square, not by sabotage.”

“Oh? You have a plan?”

“Hah! No, but I know I’m right, so it’ll work out. Well, how do I look?” Satsuki took a step back to admire her, not just how she looked in the gi but also just... all of her. *I know I’m right, so it’ll work out? Ryuko, how are you real?*

“Not bad. The drawstrings will come loose eventually but that should last at least a while so long as you don’t go too far above human ability.”

“Sweet,” Ryuko grinned, “Well, let’s rock then.”

“Ryuko.”

“What?”

“You need to put the hakama on too.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

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Preparations complete, the dueling could begin. Ryuko’s challenge turned out to be quite simple:

“So here’s the deal,” She started as they squared off, shinai in hand, “I’m not gonna hurt you, like, at all -,”

“ - How generous of you -,”

“-Yeah yeah. Ok no – I’m not gonna hurt you, but I want *you* to be as violent as possible. I haven’t felt any pain in so long, so I’m serious – go as hard as you want. And then at the end whoever gets the most out of the match loses. And if I win then I’ve proved you don’t have to beat Mataro up to teach him, and if you win you can keep doing what you’ve been doing and I won’t make a fuss.”

“Get the most out of it?” Satsuki frowned, keeping her voice in its low, intimidating Honoujji tones, “And how do you propose we measure such a thing?”

“Honor system,” Ryuko smiled, “Whoever’s had more fun will just, y’know, say so. How’d you think?”

“Hmm, so you’re gambling on my own honor to be chivalrous enough to admit to having fun while you lie your way to victory? Or are you just that confident?”

Ryuko was glad Satsuki was willing to go along with her. It was true, she really didn’t have much of a plan, and it could’ve just been a simple matter of whoever actually won the match setting the terms. But Satsuki was, at human levels, almost certain to win. And she had to do something for Mataro’s sake. She flipped her Shinai into the air and twirled it on the way down how she used to with her scissor blade. “Which do you think?”

Satsuki smiled back, and drew herself back into ready position, “Well, then for your sake I hope you’ve got something more impressive than the last time we met in battle.”

“Guess it’s time to find out!” Ryuko shouted, rushing forward with the same vicious enthusiasm she’d always had. *Looks like she hasn’t learned much*, Satsuki thought, almost disappointed. At the last moment, right as Ryuko was about to land her first broad arcing swing, Satsuki stepped in with brutal precision and leveled a flurry of blows that were sure to hit her, unbalanced and wide open as she was. But then Ryuko did something she didn’t expect.

She dodged. She moved backwards. She came back with her own flurry. For a moment Satsuki was almost taken off guard. Blades crossed lightning-fast as they screamed back towards each other, pivoting on dainty footsteps that told Satsuki that Ryuko had picked up some tricks sparring with Nonon.

For Ryuko, fighting was - always had been – instinctive. Move and fight in the way that felt most natural, that just felt good. She knew there was another way to go about it, where every carefully practiced move was thought out, like a chess game. That way was supposed to be better, that was what Tsumugu had tried to teach her, but she’d just taken the techniques and shoved them into her own patchwork of skills. Satsuki showed her how it was supposed to be done – she was always two steps ahead, exploiting an opening you didn’t know you had. But if you thought about that, let it intimidate you, then she only got even further ahead.

“Fucking move!” Ryuko grunted as she feinted with her shinai to Satsuki’s hip – blocked – then spun a flexible kick towards her temple on the other side. Satsuki only leaned back a fraction of an inch to stop it from hitting her, then struck her own foot out to trip Ryuko. That was what was frustrating about Satsuki – with Nonon, who bounded around like gravity didn’t apply to her and twirled off her naginata like a pole dancer, it was always *hold still* – but Ryuko knew all too well how Satsuki could stand still as a statue then surge forward at the last moment with astonishing violence. It was impressive, really.

It wouldn’t stop Ryuko though. She was too fast for Satsuki to trip and backed off until their shinai were at a standard ready distance – crossed halfway down the blades – Another short spate of clatters and they were straining against each other, testing strengths in a fearsome standoff. Ryuko could’ve easily overpowered her, but instead she took the opportunity to moderate her power output to exactly Satsuki’s own strength.

“My, you have gotten better,” Satsuki smiled in grim appreciation in spite of the strain.

“And you’re still as sharp as ever.”

“Show me, Ryuko. Show me what you’ve learned!” Satsuki dropped her blade, by all indications leaving herself wide open. If any thought went through Ryuko’s head, it was *Wait what? Okay then, I’m going for it!*

But her instincts knew better. Satsuki didn’t leave herself open for no reason, and when her blade flew back up for a gut stab Ryuko’s hand moved of its own accord, brushing it aside at the wrist.

*Amazing!* Satsuki couldn’t help but be captivated even as she ducked under Ryuko’s counterattacks and they carried on crossing blades unabated. Ryuko may not have been a true master by raw skill – now that she was on the attack Satsuki could see she still used the same predictable rhythm of swings she always had – but nobody else Satsuki had ever fought could have pulled off *that*. For in wholeheartedly believing that she was launching an all-out attack, Ryuko had eliminated even the slightest tell of what her actual move would be. The novelty of it, combined with how devastating she looked in motion, was a thrill.

Oh, how she had missed this!

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The hours wore by, and Satsuki couldn’t help but accept that she was having fun. The empty dojo, sword in hand, had always been her refuge, and now she got to share it with her friends? To share it with Ryuko? Her rules of discipline she had set for Mataro were somewhere between forgotten and lackadaisically enforced in the fugue of clattering Shinai.

To mix things up they alternated partners, then eventually switched to doubles. This was far from fair – even though everyone tried to go easy for Mataro’s benefit he was still the weak link, and when he took a hit it was one against two. But it was a joy to try all these novel combinations. Uzu and herself against Ryuko and Mataro – that should’ve been easy, but Ryuko kept tearing after whoever was harassing Mataro and so kept him in the fight longer than he should have been. When it came time for her and Mataro to square up against Uzu and Ryuko, she could see the uncertainty in him. He wouldn’t stand a chance, even if Ryuko didn’t try her hardest against him, but by this point Satsuki’s competitive spirit was in full glow.

“You take Ryuko,” She whispered to him, “I’ll try to defeat Uzu quickly and then I think we could stand a chance.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Mataro nodded with a grin. He was thrilled and reassured to finally be acknowledge as competent, however slightly, by Satsuki. Ryuko didn’t realize it, but it was in this matchup, when after several successive attempts Satsuki and Mataro actually managed to win, that her mission was truly accomplished. Satsuki now had to process the fact that Mataro actually might have true potential. It would take a while, but she saw it in him then.

And then there was fighting alongside Ryuko. Uzu and Mataro never stood a chance. Shingantsu or not, when the two of them rushed in – a one-two punch in perfect sync – a shinai could only be in one place at a time. This was Satsuki's favorite of all. If fighting Ryuko was a joy, fighting alongside her... well... that was something truly special. It made that burning clenching in her heart abate, if only momentarily.

This is something Rei can't take from me, Satsuki realized as she shot a perfect thrust right past Ryuko's head. They fought back to back, Ryuko taking on Uzu, Satsuki lazily holding Mataro off. But despite the ostensible appearance that she was focused on her blindfolded adversary she was fighting Uzu too, throwing seemingly random blows his way to cover for every weakness in Ryuko's defense, capitalize on Uzu's openings.

How did she know exactly where Ryuko was going to move? How did Ryuko trust her so, never flinching even when strikes grazed by so close that her gi ruffled with the passing wind? Satsuki didn't know, but she was so, so grateful for it. *This is something nobody can take from me!*

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In the end, Mataro got worn out not long before the doors were scheduled to open for regular lessons. Just enough time for one last bout between Satsuki and Uzu. Sweating and panting, hakamas shed and gis loose and floppy, they spent the last of their energy in furious combat that crept all the way across the practice floor, from the edge of the Koi pond to the door to Uzu's office.

Shingantsu and masterful talent against a lifetime of training. The last time they'd had a match like this Uzu's blade had broken, leaving him wide open, and Satsuki hadn't been willing to end things. Now there would be no such lack of commitment. Both their sparks were back in full force.

The final clash was so fast Mataro couldn't even sense what happened. But he could tell that Ryuko sat forward, eyebrows raised, and chuckled, "Well how about that?"

When the combatants froze, the tips of their shinai pressed perfectly against each other's hearts. Uzu also chuckled grimly.

"A tie. All these years and that's all I can manage."

"No it's good," Satsuki pulled her shinai back, smiling, "It means you're ready."

"Ready? Ready for what?"

"Ryuko? Would you like to do the honors?"

Ryuko leapt to her feet, "Sure." This wasn't planned, but she could guess what Satsuki was getting at. She cleared her throat, "I've been making you a Kamui."

Uzu's jaw could've hit the floor and it would've been less obvious than the surprise and joy Mataro could sense radiating off him. "Y-you're serious?"

“Dead serious. You can come by and see her sometime. She’s gonna look amazing.”

“Holy shit!”

“Wait, she?” Satsuki asked.

“Well yeah, I’d assume since women’s Kamui are male that a guy’s would be female, right?”

“Holy shit dude!” Uzu suddenly swept Ryuko up into a bear hug that lifted her off her feet. She made a strangled “ack” noise. “I – thanks, seriously,” He set her down, still laughing to himself.

“Hey man, don’t thank me yet,” Ryuko shot back, “Once you put her on, you know you’re gonna be put to work.”

“Psssh, I don’t care about that, I really don’t. But when’s it gonna be though?”

“End of the year, I’d say.”

“Wha-but-that’s so far away!”

“Nah, we’re gonna wait until they’re all done. Whole big ceremony. Gonna be slick.”

“Well, that does sound cool...”

“There ya go!”

“I’m sure it will be here before you know it,” Satsuki nodded, “Saiban’s day crept up on Nonon, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yeah. Yeah I can wait. It’ll just make it that much better,” Uzu had to really fight to say that, but he knew in the end it would be true. As much as Ryuko and Satsuki were right there with him, he almost didn’t feel like he had anything to say to them. He needed to tell Nonon. Would she be thrilled? Amusingly annoyed that she wouldn’t be the only one anymore? He didn’t know but he knew he needed to tell her now. “Seriously though, thank you guys. Yeah, you too Satsuki,” He hugged her too, much less roughly than Ryuko, “I know this wouldn’t have happened without your go ahead.”

“Well, it’s like I said, you’re ready,” And in so saying, she turned, just for a moment, to cast a meaningful glance towards Mataro. *This could be you one day*, it seemed to say.

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“So, whaddya think Sats?” Ryuko asked as they changed out of their gis, standing on opposite sides of the changing room and not looking at each other. “Who won?”

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “I still think it was a rigged contest, but I must concede. You’ve won.”

“Whaat? Not even gonna give me a chance to say my side.”

“What good would it do? There’s no way you’ve enjoyed it nearly so much as I. And besides, I want to give Mataro a chance now.”

“No shit.”

“He has improved quite a bit. And maybe it is time to acknowledge that. It’s worth a try.”

“Hell yeah it is.”

“But you,” Satsuki turned to her as she buttoned up her blouse, “You really must come here more often. It’s been... a real pleasure fighting with you today.”

“Almost makes a girl nostalgic, huh?”

“Oh not at all. This is much better than the old days,” Ryuko smiled and Satsuki decided that, though there was much more she wished she could say, this was enough.

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All of Satsuki’s work that day felt so much less dreary than usual. Limbered relaxation from a great workout left her with energy to spare. And seeing Rei, Satsuki couldn’t help but feel a smug satisfaction. *Little could she suspect what I have with Ryuko. What I have she could never share. Nobody else can face Ryuko in battle like I can.*

But then she had to return to her little cottage in the garden, to her empty bed. And she knew it couldn’t be enough. Laying there, thinking of Ryuko, the best of all of them, like no other, it was like a hole in her hull that she’d hastily patched up had broken open, and now the water was rushing in.

Rei, damn her, she got to enjoy such perfection, and what could Satsuki do about it? Nothing at all, really. It wasn’t even like Haruka, she couldn’t justify it. She had to admit Rei was worthy – smart, capable, ambitious, really the only thing Satsuki had over her was that she was better in a fight. And that she was taller, but that wasn’t even a win in Ryuko’s book.

Satsuki despaired at the thought that they’d been together for months, through fearsome fights, and it had only made them even closer. What if this didn’t end? What if Rei, of all people, was Ryuko’s one? It didn’t feel right, she didn’t want to believe it.

Damn that woman! She hated her. She hated her? No, no that couldn’t be right! She couldn’t hate anyone, any human. Hatred was reserved for monsters. No, if there was anyone to hate it was without question her own, perverted self.

She fell asleep wallowing in guilt. This couldn’t go on much longer, one way or another.



Little did she know that, far off in the penthouse, Ryuko was wondering for the first time in months if she really was okay with acknowledging how gorgeous Satsuki was and then treating her like eyecandy, her little secret. If Satsuki knew, she'd be furious (although she knew plenty about keeping secrets). Or would she? Memories of that night in the back of the limo, the taste of rum carried on intruding lips and shapely, muscular arms holding her down. That had just been some sort of drunken, depressive outburst of sexual frustration, right? It could've been any woman and Satsuki would've acted the same, right? There was no need to think about it any further, right?

No, of course there wasn't. Not Satsuki of all people. She would never repeat Ragyo's mistakes. Right?

## Chapter End Notes

I make no promises, but I will try to get a new one up sooner rather than later. Next one's gonna be a banger.

# In which Satsuki tells an ugly truth

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May 2066

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“Ahn! Yes! Ah! More!”

This was the sound, trickling out from under Ryuko’s door late one night as Satsuki walked by to the bathroom, that finally broke her resolve. It was so foreign to her that at first she thought it had to be Rei, but no, no that was Ryuko! Devoid of her usual gruff tone, high and melodic and desperate, Satsuki had never even imagined she could sound so angelic.

“Ahhhh!” The voice tapered off into a shrill whine, then stopped. Faint panting was all that was left. So immediate was the all-consuming desire to be on the other side of that abominable door that Satsuki instantly felt nauseous.

This is what Ryuko sounds like when – when she’s –

Satsuki involuntarily shuddered. Everything logical in her (and that was quite a lot) told her she needed to leave – now – but her feet wouldn’t move.

“You bitch...,” The voice was back, now halfway between those ethereal gasps and Ryuko’s normal voice, heavy with lust “Do that again, I dare you.”

Satsuki heard Rei’s sultry chuckle, “As you command.”

Eventually she worked up the willpower to move her feet again and retreat. But as she did, Satsuki realized what she was doing. *Satsuki Kiryuin doesn’t run from her problems! What are you doing?* But which Satsuki? The one at whose command thousands had been killed? Or the one who had died at four years old when she learned the truth of the universe? She knew what was wrong with her, but maybe she didn’t know herself as well as she thought.

It was at that moment she decided once and for all that she couldn’t live like this anymore. No more of this paralyzing weakness that she had to keep from even Soroi. The little girl she had once been had not died after all; she still felt things, and shouldn’t that have been a good thing? It was time to at least try and make it so.

She was going to tell Ryuko everything. And if she never saw her again after that, then that was how it had to be. Surely even that would be better than this.

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She planned the time and place carefully, a block of time in the midday on a Wednesday when – unless one of Ryuko’s college friends forgot a notebook or something – Ryuko would be the only one in the penthouse. She’d planned what she was going to say too, but she nearly forgot it when Ryuko flopped down across from her on the couch in the reading nook saying, “So what’s up, Sats?” with a smile.

*She’s so happy now, and in a moment, she’s going to be so disgusted. I don’t want to do this to her, but I suppose best to rip off the bandage now.*

Ryuko, for her money, wasn’t sure she took Satsuki seriously when she’d said it was “something important”. Probably some lab-related thing, not exactly exciting stuff. So what Satsuki said took her by complete surprise.

“Ryuko, you remember that one night I went to the nightclubs with you? When I blacked out?”

“Yeah? Ohhh shit is this about that video of you that showed up online? I mean, I can tell you for sure that you didn’t say anything you shouldn’t of, you just got *way* too personal with some strangers.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Oh. So…”

Satsuki sighed, “I didn’t black out, Ryuko. I lied about that. I’m sorry.”

*What.*

There are moments when a new piece of information, invading the mind like a virus, causes all of one’s thoughts to go wild with the possible implications. Ryuko was staring at Satsuki’s face – her eyes were downcast, she couldn’t bear to look at Ryuko – experiencing one of these moments right then. *Oh my god – ohmygod she **knows**. She probably thinks, no, she **must** think I came onto her – that I forced myself on her, took advantage of her! And now she can’t even trust me, and fuck, fuck she’s right! I’m no better than Ragyo! I must have known, subconsciously, that if I got her drunk something like that could happen!*

Satsuki watched panic mount on Ryuko face, thinking she was putting all the pieces together and coming to the correct conclusion, and she bowed her face even further. *Please, please be gentle Ryuko. I’m sorry I was wrong, I can’t take this!*

“I-I’m so sorry!” Ryuko was suddenly blurting, “I didn’t know what I was doing, I swear! I – I – oh fuck Satsuki you gotta believe me I misread the situation, or I was drunk or something honest to god I didn’t mean to kiss you!”

“Ryuko?” Satsuki was looking up at Ryuko now with a completely different expression – wide eyed shock, mouth slightly ajar. Ryuko saw this, saw, and didn’t understand.

“Satsuki, I -,”

“ – no, wait, this is wrong! Ryuko what are you apologizing for, I forced myself on you!”

*What.*

Ryuko’s mind went wild again. “Wait, you mean -,”

“ – Please, please let me explain,” Satsuki said, and when Ryuko nodded with bated breath she went on, “I didn’t black-out that night, but I did lose control of myself. I can’t explain it, but it was like I was watching out of my own eyes while someone else controlled my body. But -,”

“Oh okay. I get that, that’s what it’s like -,” *Oh, that’s all? Phew, I guess it doesn’t really matter if she remembers or not then. She’d just torn up because she did something stupid while drunk, she’ll get used to it.*

“- Let. Me. Finish.” *Oh no.* “But, what I was trying to say was that, though I wasn’t in control of myself, that doesn’t mean I wasn’t acting on certain... urges. Urges that I would have never acted on if I had been in control.”

*What.*

*Wait, is it really happening? Holy fuck, holyfuck I think it is!* “Wait, back up. What are you saying?”

Satsuki looked at Ryuko with inconsolable sadness. It was time to come clean, about everything. “Ryuko for a long time, since before I found out we were sisters, I have been infatuated with you,” Ryuko’s jaw was wide. Satsuki didn’t take that as a good sign, and her voice became more frantic, like she didn’t know what she was even saying “And I know it’s wrong, and I shouldn’t – I shouldn’t feel this way about you, but I can’t help it. You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted, the only woman that I’ve felt anything like love for, and I can’t *stop* myself. I’ve tried for two whole *years* now, but I just can’t keep it bottled up in me anymore. But then I went and did that and I thought for sure you would find out then and I’d never see you again but when I woke up you didn’t say anything about it and so I lied and I’m really sorry but I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. Ever since we put some of your blood in Junketsu and I – I thought I felt something in your blood, like you had feelings for *me* – and I was wrong, but I can’t get myself to stop thinking about it!”

“Satsuki...,” Ryuko muttered with a morose chuckle as she listened to Satsuki babble. She could barely believe this was really happening. But now that this new possibility was added, a million little things started making sense. Tiny glances here and there, the way she always said “take care, Ryuko,” so tenderly. This was real, not some sort of sick joke.

Just months ago she’d still been entertaining the fantasy – content knowing it could never happen – that Satsuki might one day make this very confession, and that it would spill into a passionate, illicit affair. Of course, in her mind Satsuki was much more suave; she swept

Ryuko off her feet with a smoldering gaze and a smug smile. The imagined Satsuki knew she was irresistible.

But the real one was as close to tears as Ryuko had ever seen her. She sat stiff in her chair, the same way she once had while making proclamations in her office room, steeling herself. This was ruining her. *This really is wrong, isn't it?*

"I understand if you – you never want to speak to me again. I just couldn't live with the secret anymore."

Ryuko was still chuckling to herself, shaking her head, saying, "what the hell Satsuki." Satsuki took this as a bad sign.

"Please don't be angry, Ryuko."

"Oh it's much worse than angry."

Ryuko didn't mean it this way, but to Satsuki that could only mean ultimate condemnation. "I'm sorry. I'll just – I'll just go." She stood abruptly, still not looking at Ryuko. If she had, or she'd seen what was really there, she would've known this wasn't necessary. Even she couldn't stay logical in this situation.

But Ryuko grabbed her at the wrist as she stormed by. A sudden fear stabbed her - if she let Satsuki go thinking what she clearly thought, no amount of coaxing would get her to show her face around her ever again. And, secrets or not, that wouldn't do.

"Satsuki wait! Let me talk." Ryuko's hand shook as conflicting urges battled. Alarm bells screaming *No! Wrong wrong wrong!* And a pounding in her chest demanding *Kiss her! Now's your chance! Do something!*

Satsuki looked at her now. "You weren't wrong," Ryuko said. She could watch comprehension, disbelief, and terror war in Satsuki's eyes as they softened, got even glassier.

"You aren't joking." She finally said. Satsuki had just experienced her own mental explosion of implications. But even in a moment like this, she flashed through the possibilities faster than Ryuko. This was what she was trained for, after all.

"Sit down, Sats, and get ahold of yourself. Satsuki Kiryuin doesn't freak out like this," Ryuko declared. When she'd complied Ryuko went on, sitting up now, *making* Satsuki look at her. Any qualms about keeping secrets were gone now. Satsuki needed to hear her side, or she'd never go back to normal. "You really never considered that I might feel, like, the same exact way about you?"

"...No, I never would have dreamed it," Satsuki said wonderingly. With this new possibility, a million little things started making sense. How Ryuko always called her "a catch", all the gifts of homemade clothing she'd given her that always fit so perfectly. No, this was no prank. But Ryuko was okay, somehow, or at least so it seemed. This sinful attraction wasn't eating at her conscience. Hope surged in Satsuki. "I don't understand."

“Wha – I – c’mon Sats, you know you’re the most gorgeous, badass chick who’s ever lived, right? Who wouldn’t love you? I mean, I mean you’re the one who *caught* me!”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Sats flushed at the compliment. *She loves me!* “I don’t understand – you seem alright, even in spite of that.”

“Well, I dunno. Do you drive yourself crazy like this for every woman you like?” Ryuko asked, then remembered – there hadn’t been any others for Satsuki, probably not even crushes knowing her. Growing up in high schools where most girls were straight, and didn’t like her anyway, Ryuko had learned that some things were best kept to herself. “Er, every woman you thought was good looking?”

“No I... I don’t know. But it’s not like other women though.”

“No, no I know. This is some different shit. Fuck.”

The sat there - Ryuko on the couch, Satsuki on her armchair - for a long pause before Satsuki spoke. Long enough for the feeling that this was real, that the woman sitting right there had desperately wanted them for years, held back by just one pesky fact, to sink in for both of them. “... But you felt this way since before you found out?”

“That we’re sisters? Pssh, of course I did – I hated your guts too, but yeah. There was this little bit right when we teamed up at the festival when I thought, y’know, if we made it out alive...,” Ryuko trailed off, remembering that what she’s specifically thought was – *if we make it out alive, I’m gonna hate-fuck the pretentious fucking brains out of her*. “I thought there might be a chance,” She said instead.

“Hmm. So, what are we supposed to do?” Satsuki had calmed down a bit by now. Ryuko had inspired her to think that maybe there was some way to live with this.

“What? What are you asking me for you’re the smart one!”

“Ryuko I’ve been thinking about it for years now and you see how well it’s gone. Maybe smarts isn’t what we need right now.”

“Yeah, but it’s like I just *didn’t* think about it. And now that I know it’s like, er, it’s like it’s something totally different...,” Ryuko wracked her brain. What was she supposed to say now? “... Fuck. It’s really fucked up, isn’t it? It’s like it’s hereditary of something.”

“The modern-day Hapsburgs.”

“You said that when you were drunk what’s that supposed to mean?”

Satsuki waved a dismissive hand,” Medieval Europe. This very inbred royal family. Doesn’t matter, really.”

“Oh, I get it... okay, here’s what I’m thinking,” Satsuki sat up, nodded. “You don’t – you didn’t think we would actually *do* anything, right? I mean, you just -,”

“No no,” Satsuki shook her head vigorously, “I mean, I want to, but no. We can’t, we shouldn’t. It’s a sin.”

“Good. Because I’ve got Rei, so like that’s not gonna happen. I... it’s not like with Haruka, her I just kinda...,” Ryuko wasn’t, even now, with so many secrets laid bare, willing to tell Satsuki about The Silence and the hole in her head that would drive her mad if she didn’t distract herself, “... wanted, a girlfriend, I dunno. If things keep going well with Rei, I really think I might... marry her. I love her too, I know you don’t believe that I can love two people or more at once, but that’s just how it is.”

That hurt. Satsuki averted her eyes from Ryuko again, cleared her throat. This must be how Ryuko did it – she might have been the only one for Satsuki, but the reverse was evidently not true. It made sense though. Rei was a deserving woman, and she seemed to make Ryuko happy most of the time. Besides, it wasn’t like she herself had any hope of marrying Ryuko. If it ever got out to the public that they were sisters, they’d be ruined.

“So what then?”

“Well I’d thought that maybe when I loved her, I’d stop thinking of you too. But I guess that’s not gonna happen. So I’m not gonna stop thinkin’ of you, looks like.”

“I *can*’t stop. I would if I could.”

“Right, so we’ll have to do what I’ve done.”

“... Which is?” This was what Satsuki had been waiting for!

“Just live with it,” Ryuko said, making her mouth twist into her confident smile. Satsuki looked puzzled.

“I can’t *do* that, I thought I made that clear.”

“Nah but like, we have each other now, right? We’ll fight this thing together.”

“Hmm. So you suggest that, because we’ve told each other we... feel this way, that we will resist the urge better?” She left unsaid the question: wouldn’t this just make it more likely that one day their resolve would crack, and they’d fall into each other’s arms?

“Yeah. I mean we *aren’t* gonna act on it, so what’s better – we have each other to talk to if it’s like, really fucking you or me up, or that we don’t?”

Satsuki considered, sighed. “Well, what can we do now but that, I suppose?” Nothing that they’d said could be taken back now. “I think I see what you’re getting at. This is just a part of us that, like it or not, we have to live with, isn’t it?”

“Yeah... yeah that’s it! I mean yeah, what else are we supposed to do?”

They sat in thought for a moment longer – something more was there to be said, but what? The self-disgust in Satsuki hadn’t gone away, but it was tinged with relief. No longer being alone in this, after so long – she hadn’t even imagined this outcome. It was like a

whole new world – a whole new Ryuko. Maybe she could understand loving more than one person – this secret, illicit thing they shared wasn't something you could build a life on, a marriage, a family. That was something else. She got it now. She felt closer to her incomprehensible little sister than she ever had before.

Ryuko saw that Satsuki was staring at her and smirked knowingly. Satsuki realized that now, so long as she didn't allow anyone else to notice, she could stare at Ryuko without fear that she would notice. But then, Ryuko would tease her – as she did now, slowly rolling her neck and letting out a little, sighing exhale that could be mistaken for a moan.

“Let's not push it too far, now,” Satsuki chided gently.

“What do you mean?” She asked innocently, then chuckled, “Yeah, alright. Only so far we can go.”

“Boundaries. We'll set some kind of boundaries.”

“Right. I think we both know what's too far, don't we?”

“We do indeed.”

“It won't be a problem. I believe in us,” Ryuko concluded, and Satsuki nodded. *So this is what things will be like from now on. Moments that used to make me so violently uncomfortable will now be... nice, almost, maybe. And we won't go too far, not again.*

And so, the secret became theirs to share. The sky seemed much brighter to Satsuki when she left the penthouse. A great weight of guilt had been lifted from her. God, or the universe, or whatever would surely judge her harshly for this one day, but Ryuko wouldn't. And that was what mattered.

Ryuko too felt free and easy for the rest of the day. She'd been in the perfect situation to do something she might've regretted forever, and she'd resisted. What a satisfying feeling it was! *When Satsuki was tearing her own hair out, look at me, I made her feel better. I fixed everything, when even she couldn't. And she loves me. She loves me! She may have to take it to the grave, but at least I know, and she knows I love her too. I guess that's what matters, in the end.*

They both got the best sleep they'd had in months that night.

## Chapter End Notes

I always thought that, in a lot of SatsuRyu fics when the confession happens Satsuki comes off as weirdly untroubled by the whole thing (moments of passion aside). Never seemed quite how I pictured it. We have to acknowledge that even if we like it this is an



immoral thing, and they would know this. So I tried my best to write how I pictured it. I expect that this will be a significant chapter, so if you have strong opinions on What I Have Done, let me know.

# In which Minazuki meets her destiny

## Chapter Summary

Ohhh boy its a 'lil late but here's a nice Easter gift for you. As always I don't really know how it turned out, I basically banged this one out in like a night and I'm tired now. Let me know in the comments if, y'know, you feel strongly about it

## Chapter Notes

New thing that I'm doing: Including music fitting the scene in the top notes. Sometimes it'll be digetic, sometimes It'll just be fitting soundtrack, sometimes it'll be ambiguous. Sometimes it'll be KIK OST, sometimes not. I will never write it so that you HAVE to listen to the music, it'll just be a little extra for those who want.

Anyway here's the link:  
<https://youtu.be/8daj5LLf6QQ>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

June 2066

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Minazuki took a deep breath, stopping in the middle of the wide hallway with the vaulted ceilings, bare feet padding on smooth stone. Second thoughts? Well no, it was much too late for that. But still, this was an important moment. Certainly she would be forgiven for taking a moment to herself, to reflect, before the ceremony began.

The her from half a year ago would have been disgusted. But she hadn't known anything then – by the prophetess, she'd been so blind – but when she'd seen the pink-haired demon that killed Akiari, destroyed her new home, her learning had begun. Power was all that mattered. Was Akiari right or wrong? Who knew, it didn't matter, he hadn't been strong enough. On the long voyage to HQ – it wasn't even in Japan, it turned out – her thoughts had grown dark with rage and grief. Her wealth, her friends, her man, her life, her *dignity*. How much more would Satsuki take from her?

Satsuki... The very name clenched her chest with rage. At HQ, they'd been so welcoming, so supportive, so understanding. Under the neon floodlights a woman she'd vaguely recognized had embraced her, and told her that of course she'd been right to hate

Satsuki so. After all, what was how she had wronged Minazuki but a microcosm of the ruin she had brought to the order of society, to the order of nature, to the order of the cosmos?

Minazuki had been skeptical, of course. Ragyo was... right? But it made sense. There would always be rulers and subjects in society, and just the same there must always be life and death, and nothing, not even the Earth, was free from death. Why, look at what happened because Satsuki was unwilling to let the Earth die when its time came! Human civilization was past its course, that much was obvious even to Minazuki, who didn't hold herself to be any kind of great thinker. Wouldn't it have been better to go out in a bang than this slow starving to death, leaving behind a scoured, wasted ball of rock? Minazuki had been resistant, at first – surely life was worth living, wasn't it?

But under the tutelage of her new sponsor, the new *Grand Couturier*, a sort of priestess as far as Minazuki could figure out, she had learned to see things differently. Humans were creatures like any other, and given half the chance they would overeat and overbreed and war themselves to oblivion. That was mankind's sin, and Minazuki felt crushed by the realization. What could she do, she'd asked, sitting at her sponsor's desk in her office with the wide marble columns. The graceful old woman – she didn't seem *that* old, but her hair was almost Kiryuin white – had smiled. It was simple. Trust in the Life-Fibers, that they might turn our small lives into something of meaning.

It had taken months, but under the welcoming gazes of the council, with the greetings of thousands of friendly cultists from around the world, Minazuki was converted. The life-fibers were mankind's destiny, its masters. After all, who had ever claimed otherwise but Satsuki? And if there was one thing that Minazuki knew about Satsuki, it was that she was a liar.

And then they'd shown her Rosuketsu.

“Are you ready, Lady Minazuki?” A quavering voice snapped her back to the present. Kuroido stood to the side, respectfully marking her passage down the hall into the glow ahead. She smiled at him – once she might have felt uncomfortable with the ugly old man seeing her in her full, nude glory, but she understood him now. He was a servant, that was his role in society, why he was so frail and pathetic. What did she care about his opinion?

“Quite ready,” She nodded, and continued on her way. Behind her the end of the hall was cloaked in shadow. She knew what was back there, of course, her own room among other things, but it all looked so strange now. There was no going back

“It is so brave of you to attempt this, Lady Minazuki,” He bowed, “I assure you, to sacrifice your body, even if only for a few months, is more than even our greatest warriors could bear.”

“Hmph! If it's what I must I do to destroy Satsuki and her minions I would do that and more,” Minazuki declared, but truthfully she was glad it would only be a few months. Rosuketsu would have control over her body until things were set right and the natural order of society restored, and then she could get on with life. Life in a doomed world, sure, but at least one that obeyed the order of the universe. She strode on into the neon lights with confidence and grace.

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A vast amphitheater opened before her, buzzing with life. The seats teemed with throngs of cultists, Ragyo Kiryuin's former employees from REVOCS facilities around the world. If it weren't for the uniforms they wore – not all ultima uniforms, but more than enough were clad in living weaponry – they would look just like anyone else. Above them, the sky, stained blue and white by all the brilliant lights that illuminated it. Minazuki wouldn't know, but that sky was cold and windy. The heat of the amphitheater made it impossible to sense that, but she could see something else. Glimmering green auroras danced across the darkness.

*I suppose then that we must be in the artic, someplace,* Minazuki thought, but didn't waste much more time on such thoughts. Something much closer demanded her attention. In the center of the amphitheater there stood a display case, and in it, her Rosuketsu. Her Kamui.

She walked to it breathlessly – her sponsor was saying something, a prayer, from a high podium many yards away – but Minazuki didn't care. Her Kamui, her power, was right before her eyes.

In shape, it resembled a Kimono – with flowing silky sleeves of golden-white, a huge red bow on a sash about the waist, and rose patterns all across the silvery bodice. It was beautiful. And as she drew nearer, Minazuki could see even closer the terrifying, alien glory of it. Eye slits along the breasts, a surface smooth and synthetic, almost like skin. Minazuki resisted the urge to shudder.

*Will it hurt? Will I see what my own body is doing? Maybe I'll just wake up when the fight's over, like I was put under for surgery. I hope not. I hope I get to see my hands beat the life from Satsuki's smug face. I hope I get to see when we rescue Takamori. I guess it doesn't matter, really. Once this is all done, he and I will be free at last, only this time we won't have to hide anything, I'm sure of it.*

Her turn came, inevitably. It was quite an elaborate ceremony, but she didn't pay attention as the troops marched by, leading dozens of chained hybrid beasts of many kinds, even a mutated lion the size of a Tyrannosaurus, and carrying three odd capsules that resembled coffins. A little gilded knife was granted to her and, heart pounding in her ears, she approached the display case and played her part. There was no longer any time to hesitate, and Minazuki's mind raced under the watchful eyes of thousands of faithful. This was the ultimate privilege she was being granted right now. *How did I get here?* She thought giddily *Wearing a Kamui... Takamori will be amazed when he finds out. Even more so when he finds out Satsuki Kiryuin died by my hands. Hold on, my dear, I'm coming!*

“Mighty godrobe, Kamui Rosuketsu, take my blood. It is the vow of our covenant, the crimson thread that binds my will,” Minazuki intoned as she slowly, painstakingly drew a thin slit along her finger, letting the blood dribble forth. Better than looking at Rosuketsu now; now that she was so close, the presence of it was overwhelming. She felt like chilling wind was emanating from the display case even as she reached up, smearing her finger along the fabric. Maybe this was a bad idea, the tension in her shoulders suddenly screamed. But it

was too late. The trail of blood her finger left percolated into the Kamui and was gone, and for a moment nothing seemed to happen.

Then something seized Minazuki's body. A lightheaded feeling, drunkenness, all throughout her, so fast she didn't even know what was happening. Then, something else, in her head, like a thought that filled up her entire brain. There were no words, but in this sort of fog there was something, an idea, a communication... music?

*[Oh my dear, look what they've done to you]* it seemed to convey. It was so sweet, soft, so... caring, this music, that Minazuki sank into its recesses. She saw the expectant faces of the REVOCS cultists looking at her, but she could no longer process them. This music, this feeling... wonderful. It knew, it knew her pain, the injustice, her grief and rage. *[Come to me. I'll make everything better]*.

Then the golden orange eyes snapped open, wet and fleshy like egg yolks, and the Kamui unfurled like an anemone, grabbing her stunned body, pulling it up off the ground. With a crumpling, wrapping noise it enveloped her, threading thin filaments into her pale flesh. Everything went white.

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Minazuki Kiryuin was born in 2042 to a lesser line of the Kiryuin royal family. Her childhood was one of ease and luxury; she attended the most prestigious of private academies, then the most prestigious of universities. Everyone loved her there; she never felt like a poser compared to her more talented classmates, and she did so well in her classes that nobody could doubt that she was a rare genius. So many wonderful memories – dances and pranks and late nights drinking in lavish beachfront homes and sure there was a little drama but it was all in good fun.

And when her older brother returned from his travels abroad, tanned and filled with unshakeable confidence, and they met as many and woman like they'd never known each other before, nobody had made a fuss. She'd never even considered that they might, that in another world this might have been swept under the rug as a family shame. Endless days and nights by his side, there was even a wedding in there somewhere, but even that paled in comparison to a life lived free of fear or secrecy, without work or hardship. Just delicious food, galas beyond compare in beauty, the company of loving family on all sides. No backstabbing, no internecine squabbling, the Kiryuins were whole and powerful, and Minazuki their golden gem.

Out of all her family, her favorite was undoubtedly Auntie Ragyo. Ragyo, the silk angel, beloved matriarch of the family and Minazuki's own mentor. She'd seen and done it all, and every conversation with her became deep philosophy, wisdom Minazuki did her best to live by. Only, she'd never had children, just adopted a little blonde creature who became her lover when she reached maturity (nobody raised a fuss about that either). Minazuki once asked her about the lack of heirs, or even a husband, but Ragyo simply laughed.

“My dear Minazuki, what use would I have for daughters?” That rich, melodic voice trilled, “They would only be a disappointment compared to *you*.” Minazuki had burned with pride for days after.

When she finally passed, as all things must, it was with a smile on her face. Minazuki couldn't be sure, but she thought it was because she would live on, live on to carry out Ragyo's legacy. And then the crown passed to Minazuki, the golden queen, and she reigned in prosperity for such a time that she could not remember all the days.

All this - a lifetime of fabricated memories, every little detail rendered fully in red and white, rushed through Minazuki's mind in mere seconds. In the waking world, tears trickled down her stunned face. She didn't feel them; she would never know them. It all went by so fast, such a torrent of memory that Minazuki's understanding of what was real was instantly destroyed. She knew only one thing: Her life was beautiful, and it was beautiful because she had always followed Auntie Ragyo's dogma - give yourself over to clothing. She was just as much an accessory as any golden gown, gem encrusted tiara, and she loved it. No, no the clothing wore her - the crown made the queen - not the other way around!

And she forgot the words "life-fiber", even as in the waking world they siphoned blood from her veins. Forgot the name, but she would never forget how *good* it felt to be worn by them.

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A column of crimson flames erupted from the display case, shooting up miles into the sky with a deafening roar, a primal screech of something other than human. The hybrid beasts, in their gilded ceremonial muzzles, strained towards the column as though they would leap up and be consumed in it. So too did the ultima uniforms of the cultists feel a magnetic attraction claw across them, so much that those closest had to brace themselves, even drop to the ground to keep from being pulled in. The coffin-capsules shook and groaned in harmony.

When the flames died, the *Grand Couturier* removed shining sunglasses - she hadn't torn her eyes away for even a moment. What she saw captivated her - at first glance, it looked like the same woman who had stood before the display case moments before. But nothing could be further from the truth. Every inch of this woman's body was enshrouded in brilliant white fabric, skintight with ribs showing, long flowing sleeves and laces traced through with glowing red trails. Sinuous, curving red horns sprung from within her golden hair, twisting over her scalp like those of an ibex. From her shoulders sprung forth great rounded pauldrons traced through with scales, smooth and shining like pearls. In their centers, those fleshy gold-orange eyes regarded the crowd. Without a word between them, every cultist in the amphitheater bowed.

The *Grand Couturier* wasted no time hurrying over and prostrating herself in front of the newly awoken god. This was the greatest moment of life (she'd always thought that would be the starseed cocoon sphere, but this would have to do) and she wasn't going to mess it up now.

"Oh mighty godrobe Rosuketsu, your humble servant welcomes you to this worthless world."

Minazuki's feet touched to the ground, heels clicking softly. Her eyes slid open, wild with a sort of furious glee. A broad, toothy smile spread wide across her face. Too

wide, as though she was trying but hadn't managed to get it quite right.

“Rosuketsu... ‘Rose’”. So that is what you have called me,” The voice was Minazuki's but the words, they came from something else entirely. It twisted her voice, making it come out soft, thoughtful, calculating. The voice of a viper. It thrilled the *Grand Couturier*. What a beautiful voice! Befitting of a god, truly. “You have done well. This vessel has a high affinity for me. It must have been selectively bred.”

To say that the thing which saw from Minazuki's eyes *thought* would, by all technicality, be inaccurate. To progress from one idea to another, linearly, to develop them from logic and observation, these things were the way lesser beings functioned. Such a limiting notion. The Kamui *understood*, instead, and as it curled its rictus even further, until its face was split with predatory glee, it understood the human bowing before it.

A flesh puppet. A willing servant. No doubt it thought itself better, more enlightened than the girl it had just fed Rosuketsu like so much meat, but it was no less selectively bred. Millions of years of genetic nudging, molding its every thought and desire into the perfect shape, the perfect slave, the perfect livestock. But then, not all of the livestock on this world were so perfect. Something had gone wrong, it understood, that was why it was here.

“Bring my brothers to me,” Rosuketsu commanded. The coffins were brought forth. Each was a tube of smooth steel, the underside of which was enshrouded by life support machines. Engravings laid across each one – lilies, violets, orchids.

“I present to you, O' godrobe,” The *Grand Couturier* intoned formally as they were lifted to vertical standing position, a half circle before Rosuketsu's appraising sets of eyes, “The godrobes Yuriketsu, Sumiretsu and Ranketsu.”

The steel tubes slid open. Within each, a young woman lay suspended in the air- IV tubes flowing from her body, a Kamui enshrouding her. This was the price paid to allow a pure Kamui, without the infection of human DNA, to wear an ordinary human. Stasis, frozen bodies would not become burnt out, and they could slumber until it was time to hunt again. The Kamui were dormant, but certainly not unaware. Their eyes snapped open, they stepped forth, and understanding flowed between the four brothers.

On the left flank stood Kamui Yuriketsu – “Lily”. In its powered-down form it was a shiny gold and red dress in the traditional European style, voluminous skirts puffing out like wings, a tight corset with delicate embroidery. Its vessel was a teenager, no more than 16 or 17, a European with long red hair and smooth pink cheeks framing a small, delicate face.

On the right, Kamui Sumiretsu – “Violet”. Its vessel was remarkably similar to Yuriketsu's, the understanding passed to Rosuketsu that they were twins, kidnapped for their remarkably high life-fiber compatibility. Sumiretsu was much less voluminous, but no less graceful – a European dress in a Greco-Roman style, flowing silky purple robes with silver belts and tassels.

And in the center there was Kamui Ranketsu – “Orchid”. It's vessel was a tall, buxom Indian woman, older than the others (including Minazuki), and in form it took on the traditional dress design of that country, a sari. A light turquoise shawl over a dress of deepest

navy blue, speckled with silver starbursts. She'd been there the longest, indeed, her vessel had been raised from birth for the sole purpose of giving herself over to Ranketsu. The pride and joy of the REVOCS India branch, although she'd never known it. She'd never even had a name.

With introductions, another understanding passed between them. A mission. They understood that something had gone wrong on this world, knew of Satsuki Kiryuin and Ryuko Matoi and the death of their emissary, the destruction of this world's primordial life-fiber. The system had been circumvented somehow, but that had happened before. They didn't think about how it hadn't happened in hundreds of millions of years, how the system was understood to have been perfected so it couldn't happen anymore. Instead, they understood what they were charged with.

Scorched earth. If they couldn't have this world, then nobody could. This world would burn, and if ever again another world looked up into the sky they would see only its lifeless husk, a warning that only death awaited those who defied the law of the universe, the rule of the life-fibers. It had been done uncountable times before. And these flesh puppets who waited so vacantly while they had their silent, wordless conversation were only the beginning.

But, Ryuko Matoi... she was interesting. They would have to examine her. She might be something new. And new things had no place in the system.

Finally, Rosuketsu spoke, "To preserve my vessel, I too shall reside in stasis, and relay our instructions from within. Make your preparations now, for our war begins at my order." Rosuketsu felt no need to condescend to these creatures, to explain, and they did not question. Sublime religiosity filled the congregation as Rosuketsu entered into its own coffin, tubes feeding nutrients to Minazuki so its vessel could remain alive. She would not have to remain for long, for with the completion of the four brothers the war would soon begin, it was agreed. No human commanders had been consulted for this, of course, they were only good for providing information now.

Plan structures began to form between the Kamui. But something interesting cropped up in Rosuketsu's understanding: *First, I'll need to take my man back.* It didn't think about how odd it was that something that mattered to its vessel would enter into its understandings. That was not how the mind of the life-fibers worked.

Minazuki was truly fortunate. Fortunate that revenge against Satsuki ruled her just as it ruled Rosuketsu. Without that linkage between them, nothing would have remained of her personality.

Not like she cared. She was lost in her own world of bliss, suspended in the white void, playing through a lifetime of memories that had never happened. The real world was gone, and she didn't care. She didn't even know it had ever existed. And if she had, she would have rejected it for this joy in a heartbeat.

For the first time in forever, she was alive.



## Chapter End Notes

By the way did you know that Satsuki is a traditional Japanese word for May? And Minazuki a word from June? As in Jun...Ketsu? And look at the date this chapter is set in ohhhhh. Yes I have been planning that for months.

# Summer calm

## Chapter Summary

Three vignettes:

Ryuko, Satsuki, and Nonon have a girl's night out

Nonon and Saiban bond

Shiro and Houka make a disturbing discovery

## Chapter Notes

This is kinda what I imagine Nonon's pop-rock music sounds like:

<https://youtu.be/9d2iLvb3mwQ>

And yes that is by the same artist who made the second opening theme for Kill la Kill.

In the summer of 2066 Japan, or actually most of the world, was caught in the grip of a brutal heatwave. Normal weather patterns combined with climate change to make what would, several decades ago, have been merely uncomfortable into something downright dangerous. There were stories of entire Saharan nations lost beneath the sands, of crops failing to take root in the thirsty soil, of oceans devoid of fish, spawning seasons interrupted. Tokyo's sea-walls were battered by several fearsome typhoons. But all of that seemed very far away in the heart of the city, nestled in the protective recesses of probably the only civilization the was actually doing... well, kind of good. At least, if it wasn't your business to care about that sort of thing.

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June 2066

Ryuko was sitting alone at her usual booth at *S-Tier*, handle of tequila in front of her, when a *Regalia* song blasted through the crowded nightclub and drowned out the roar of all the hastily propped up fans. It was one of Nonon's forays into pop-rock, with a complex but catchy melody and a tempo that was so upbeat it was actually a little too fast to make good dance music. But it was one of Ryuko's favorites and, with nobody around and a good buzz going, she started tapping along to the beat, then nodding her head, then lip-syncing to

the lyrics. Such a catchy song, it was too bad Nonon was obsessed with stuffy orchestral music, of all things.

“Ugh, I hate when they play my music in here,” It was Nonon and Saiban, back with her food. Ryuko instantly pulled her hands back and sat bolt upright.

“Oh hey, shit, you’re back! What’s up?” She quickly blurted, waving more towards Satsuki, who was following not far behind. The four of them were there for a “girl’s night out”, a chance for Satsuki to destress after another week of crisis after crisis – although she wasn’t drinking. Ryuko had wanted to bring Rei too, she needed to relax almost as much as Satsuki, but given the secret she now shared with Satsuki that seemed unwise. There were still details to be worked out, and this was the first time the two of them would be out in public together since that day. Wasn’t enjoying that enough?

“- I always hear all the little *imperfections*, I swear. And this isn’t even dance music!” Nonon blithely ignored Ryuko as she sat down, scooting over to make room for Satsuki.

[What was Ryuko doing just then? Was she dancing to the music?] Saiban asked leadingly. He, unlike Nonon, felt only a minimal secondhand effect of the alcohol coursing through her body, and he was filling in for her eyes. This deal suited them both very well, it made him feel useful and not like he was just stuck tagging along with her. Not that her friends weren’t his friends, but it wasn’t like he could go anywhere else either.

“Hey yeah, what were you doing?”

Ryuko frowned, “The fuck’s that supposed to mean? I’m just sitting here. The real question though is what this just... *mountain* of food you’re eating is supposed to be.”

“It’s jianbing!” Nonon shot back. A type of Chinese pancake similar to crepes in consistency, stuffed full of pork and hoisin sauce and plenty of herbs and seasoning, the jianbing was glistening with its grease and ridiculously huge compared to Nonon’s tiny hands. It made Ryuko sick just to look at it.

“It’s a monstrosity. It’s the size of a human child.”

“Yeah, and I’m gonna eat the whole thing!”

“You couldn’t possibly. That thing literally won’t fit in your stomach.”

“You’ve really got no clue, do you? I’ve put down a dinner this big like every day since I got Saiban,” Nonon said, diving in with gusto.

“Pssh, yeah right.”

“It’s true! He burns a hell of a lot of energy.” Shiro had actually specifically told her she wouldn’t need her diet anymore, and she was happy to be done with it. Even if the first time she ate a burger after so long starving herself she instantly fell into a food coma.

Ryuko frowned - that did make sense. Satsuki watched them squabble with a contented smile. Her best friend and her darling sister, what could be better? Tonight, they were the only people she wanted to see. She grabbed another gyoza dumpling from her plate, and when Ryuko followed her lead there was the briefest moment when they locked eyes like that was the cutest possible thing they could have done. It was cute to share an appetizer tray between them. But letting their hands touch, that was going too far – they hadn't talked about it but somehow, they'd both agreed on that. So Ryuko's hand darted back faster than the human eye could see, just to be safe.

This arrangement of theirs made a night like tonight feel like a wonderful little treat for both of them. Ryuko had made the sundress she was wearing, pastel blue with white flowers and a very low cut neck. To know that Ryuko had made this *thinking* about how it would look on her, how well it suited her – to see that *she's looking at me right now!* It made Satsuki burn flush with something amazing. She could've purred with contentment every time those sapphire eyes met hers and then, so, so carefully, slid downward. She'd had no idea this was what it felt like to be wanted. *Look at me, I'm like a blushing damnsel.*

"Eating for two, eh?" Ryuko finally said, and Nonon pulled a startled, worried face.

"Don't *say* shit like that! Anyone out there could be fuckin' paparazzi! I don't want my face on every magazine cover because you made a shitty joke!"

"Whaat? C'mon drama queen get real."

"Oh, really?" Nonon said coyly, "Well, fine, then next time you and Rei are out together I'll say something about 'tying the knot', see how *you* like it."

"... Point taken," it was Ryuko's turn to pull a face.

"Hmm, it makes me think though, if I eat this much with Saiban, Uzu's gonna go through a goddamn truckload when he gets his Kamui."

"Yeah, I was thinkin' about something similar," Ryuko nodded, "Which is that, like, a Kamui has to show a lot of skin, right? So like, on a guy... I mean, not like any of our guys are too hairy or anything, well, except Ira but he's got blonde hair. But like I dunno how I feel about it. Cuz like – what's it gonna be accentuating, y'know?"

"... Are you being for real right now?" Nonon asked, exasperated to the point of seeming stunned. Up until this point, all their squabbling had been with a smile on both their faces and laughs behind their voices, but now Nonon seemed a bit serious. She couldn't wait until Uzu got his Kamui, and neither could he. She couldn't explain this feeling to him, and she was afraid that he might think she was ignoring him.

"What? I mean, uh, yeah?"

"Holy shit. You're seriously that fucking self-centered"

"Hey, that's totally unfair! I'm just chattin' here."

“Oh, and just because you don’t like guys all of a sudden its this whole ‘moral dilemma’ here. Some of us do, you know! Us straight girls have had to put up with your fat ass all over the internet for two damn years, you know! Or is my boyfriend just not cute enough for you, is that it?”

“No, that’s different!”

“Is it? Why’s that, pray tell?”

“Well, I, I mean I dunno, alls I was saying was that if see a stray pube in there I’m gonna be seriously grossed out, what’s wrong with that? It’s just a damn joke, geez.”

“It’s a shitty joke. No, you know what you’re like, you’re like one of those fucking macho-toxic-masculine-frat stars who’s like ‘uh... duh... I’m not fuckin’ gay bruh! I’m so straight I never even look at a man bruh that’s fuckin’ gay!’ except it’s in reverse so you’re like, ‘Oh look at me I’m Ryuko Matoi and I’m not fuckin’ straight bruh, I never even look at a man that shit’s fuckin’ hetero as fuck’.”

“Okay you made you point!” Ryuko fumed, throwing her hands up in frustration. Not how she expected that response would be received. “Sats, you get what I mean, right?”

“Wait! Oh dude I’m not done here! No cuz like you literally are a frat star, just in a girl’s body.”

“I am so not!”

“Let’s-let’s run through this real quick here. You drink and smoke weed like, all the time - ,”

“- So do you –“

“You’re always on the verge of flunking out, when you aren’t dating somebody you fuck every girl who’ll talk to you, you talk in that horrible street slang, you’ve got no plans for the future, you’re just coasting on your powers and your money! I miss anything here?”

“Alright, that does it,” Ryuko, now fully pissed off, started to stand up. Nonon was so totally off base here, it was ridiculous! *But is that really how people see me?* A part of her wondered. She didn’t really have a comeback, so she shot Satsuki a look that said, “*You don’t think that, right? Protect me!*”

“Come now Nonon, there’s no reason to be so harsh. You and I both know Ryuko has much more to her than that,” Satsuki said sternly. Even if she hadn’t been so conditioned to cringe at that tone of Satsuki’s voice, Nonon would’ve still been surprised and upset that Satsuki disapproved. Satsuki on the other hand was upset at herself for not stepping in sooner. *Come on Nonon, you know better!*

[I’m afraid I agreed that you’ve gone too far. You are quite intoxicated, I’m not sure if you realize.] That, to Nonon, was even worse. She could feel... embarrassment! Well that wouldn’t do at all!

“Well, if you’re all gonna gang up on me, fine!” Nonon said, fumbling between crossing her arms and stabbing her fork into the jianbing.

[... you should apologize] Saiban murmured when Ryuko didn’t sit down.

Nonon sighed, “Fine, I’m sorry. Now sit down and eat, you big oaf.”

Ryuko stared at her for a moment, then finally broke into a smile, “Yeah, alright.”

Nonon smiled back, “I’ll say this though, you won’t have to worry about that with Uzu.” She leaned in close with a conspiratorial whisper, “He even waxes his balls.”

“Wha!” Ryuko nearly spat out her food, “Oh my god *gross!* TMI girl!”

“That sounds... painful. And this is considered a good thing?” Satsuki murmured as Nonon cackled at Ryuko’s discomfort.

Later, Ryuko left to take a phone call from Rei. A long phone call filled with laughter and the type of conversation couples tended to fall into – skipping between topics like flipping through TV channels. Now Nonon had Satsuki all to herself, for all practical purposes.

“Y’know, I still don’t really see it,” Nonon shrugged over towards the corner where Ryuko was standing, “But it makes her more tolerable, so I guess I can let that slide.”

Satsuki nodded, “I suppose it might make Rei more tolerable as well,” a lie, but that was alright. Right now, Satsuki was basking in Nonon and Ryuko’s company, and with the secret of Ryuko’s love and Nonon’s very overt friendship she decided she probably didn’t hate Rei *that* much. “I think it makes sense though. They’ve got similar sorts of childhoods, Ryuko likes that Rei is responsible, Rei likes... well, the same things you complained about in Ryuko, actually.” *And you know what, I like those things too.*

“Ech! She’s like Uzu was when I first started dating him.” Satsuki lifted an eyebrow as if to say “*Well how much has he really changed?*”. “He’s a work in progress, shut up!” Nonon blurted with a laugh.

“Oh, you’re too hard on him. If I’m being honest, he’s been a good guy since the shingantsu incident, not perfect, but maybe that’s all you can ask of someone. I don’t know.”

“Hmm. Ryuko never did set you up with a date, did she?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“You want me to take a stab at it, just say the word.”

“You think you could do better?”

“Well... I dunno, do you think you’d like a musician? I know a pop singer who might be up your alley. Look, all I’m saying is that Aikuro’s right that it would improve your public

image if people saw you got a girlfriend.”

Satsuki propped her chin on her palm as she considered. Herself - five, ten years down the line when her hair had gone the full Kiryuin white – the sugar momma for some peppy young starlet? Wouldn’t that be funny – she’d be her mother’s daughter then, that’s for sure. And she had Ryuko’s love now, and Ryuko was going to marry someone else, so she’d forgive Satsuki for doing the same, certainly. Maybe it could be done.

“I don’t know... maybe one day. There’s too much to do.”

“Huh! As if that’s ever gonna change.”

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July 2066

*[Hey, Nonon? Nonon!]*

Nonon pattered herself awake, murmuring as she disentangled herself from Uzu’s arms. He stirred, probably already awake, but he’d stopped nagging her about waking him up. No point anymore. “Whu?”

*[I want to go out]* Saiban whispered (not like anyone else could hear him anyway).  
*[I know it’s Ryuko’s night to patrol, but...]*

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” She rolled out of Uzu’s bed, already wearing Saiban.  
“Where’re we going tonight?”

*[I want to see something about the history of your world]*

“It’s your world too,” Nonon said with a gentle laugh, closing the door to the bedroom and making her way over to the balcony.

*[No, where I’m from, it’s... well, you’ve seen it]* The field of swimming stars. The things that lived there, skimming under the surface like sharks the size of continents. What awful dreams they had shown him.

“I won’t let you go back there, you know that. Forget about that.”

The history that Nonon chose to take him to was Yasukuni Shrine, a vast war memorial. The air was like soup, so hot and sticky. But when Saiban was powered on Nonon somehow felt much more comfortable, she still felt the heat but it just didn’t bother her somehow, so she kept him that way even though they glowed gold.

“Here, take a look at this one. This is the World War Two section.” Nonon said as she settled down in front of a statue. Something about the reverence with which she said it struck Saiban.

*[This is the last one before the life-fiber war, isn't it?]*

“Yeah, but it’s still more than a century ago.”

*[That’s good. There was peace then.]*

“Not really. It’s just nobody was keeping track. I mean look at this place,” Nonon held up a hand expressively. The slums were creeping up on the sides of the venerable old building, corrugated sheet metal and the thrumming, earthy scent of human life. There were fallen, dried leaves all across the paths, not swept away. The shrine itself was a piece of history now. “We lost this one, you know that? Americans got us. Badly.”

*[I see... the Americans harnessed the power that drives your sun into weapons and used them on your country.]* Saiban downloaded the knowledge from Nonon’s brain. It wasn’t much. Aikuro, in his guise as Mr. Mikisuki, had taught a pretty competent history class at Honnouji, but Nonon had spent it writing sheet music and battle formations. The Elite Four didn’t have to go to class. *[That’s incredible. But it’s good they haven’t been used again].*

“You just wait. Every couple years they threaten that they’re gonna actually do it. One of these days...”

*[You know it’s odd. You feel much more sympathetic to the Americans in this war, even though your people lost]*

Nonon chuckle morosely, stretching out across the lawn. The sky above was a serene lavender, lit up even in the dead of night by the city’s lights. “They say there was a time when Americans used to believe in something. I don’t know. If there was, it was so long ago nobody alive remembers it. Nowadays they’re no better than savages.”

*[But yet...]*

“Yeah, I don’t know. They were better I think, believe it or not things would probably be worse today if Japan had won.”

*[So why did the war begin, then?]*

“Oh who knows? Too many reasons. No reason. I’m not an expert, believe it or not,” Saiban parsed through those history class memories and saw that, sure the reason it started wound up being that the axis powers attempted to conquer the world. But why did they do that? That’s where things got too complicated for either of them. A chain of causes leading back years, decades, maybe even centuries. Was there no way to stop it?

Saiban felt a peculiar sadness from Nonon at that thought, which surprised him. How could it be that a warrior - sure, she hadn’t always been this way, but still - could despair at the thought that war was inevitable? But that was what it meant to be human, to be wrapped up in this web of contradictions. Maybe one day he’d be able to unravel the threads and find the underlying truth beneath. But that seemed as complicated and useless as trying to unravel the threads of human history.



*[I guess some people just can't get along, can they?]*

“No...” Nonon said, but what she thought of was not long-ago wars, but her brother, her parents. They sat in silence, lingering on these memories. Her brother yanking her pink hair, shoving her little toddler self around until she was sobbing, calling her a freak. And then her parents, who did nothing but watch it all happen again and again. “Some people you can't reason with.”

*[But yet, I'm only here because people are still unable to get along]*

“That's true.”

*[I'm glad to be here with you, you know that right.]*

“Of course I do, dummy! I feel everything you feel.”

*[Oh. How foolish of me.]* If Saiban had a mouth, he'd be smiling. Nonon wondered idly what his “human form” might look like. Short and pale like her, reedy and gentle looking. He probably would have glasses. Yeah, that was him. Basically her as a guy.

Nonon yawned, “Alright, where do you wanna go now? Sino-Japanese wars?”

*[You're very comfortable right now. Let's lie here a little longer.]*

They were woken by the lady who worked the shrine's entrance gate the next morning, and told that if they didn't want dozens of tourists all over them they'd probably ought to head home.

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August 2066

Shiro lay in the crook of Houka's arm on the break room couch, sipping his coffee from a dingy travel mug that had been one of the first things Houka got for him years ago. Another long day of reading *La Chanson de la Couturière* on his tablet. Since Houka had finished decoding it, this was about all they did. Even Aikuro thought it was pretty obsessive. But what did he know? There was so much here!

He hadn't believed it at first, when he'd done his first pass through. He didn't care about any of the ideology, the philosophy. The practical stuff, the technology they'd managed to develop using life-fibers on the other hand, that was exactly his wheelhouse. And it held up when he did the math.

Nui had been a genius. There was no way around that now. If she hadn't been evil – she'd been within inches of developing a functional faster-than-light warp drive, dipping into the life-fiber's home dimension to travel the vast gulfs of space in mere minutes! Or what about this: a source of infinite electricity, drawn right from the home dimension just the same as Ryuko's body regenerated by drawing matter from it! If Nui hadn't been evil, if only she hadn't been evil - but things that actually *improved* life for humans weren't exactly what drove her.

At least he had Ryuko. She could do everything Nui could do, if not more. At times he wanted to shout – why did he have to work with such obstinate tools! But then, what good would getting frustrated do? Were not the first fields of man plowed by the stubborn oxen? Not to compare Ryuko to an *animal*, of course. But she did have an oxen's temper, even she would admit. Shiro sighed and scrolled on to the next chapter.

“Ah, *On the transference of memory and mind*? Good luck,” Houka snarked. “Let me have some coffee.”

“You mooch. This my fourth time with this chapter. I guess there really wasn't a way to translate it better,” He passed the mug over.

“Ugh, you make it so bitter,” Houka said as he sipped.

“Like my soul,” Shiro said.

Houka chuckled, “The worst part is I know you're not kidding.”

“Yeah, whatever. Let me read now.”

Shiro carried on reading for another half an hour or so, before he reached something very interesting. A page headed with *Permanence of the Anchor*

“Take a look at this,” He passed his tablet over. Houka read the page, then reread it.

“You think that really works? That would be really bad.”

“Let's go find out,” Shiro stood up suddenly and hurried off, Houka hot on his heels.

Shiro's quarters in the lab had a walk-in closet. Or, at least, that's what it looked like. But turn the doorknob just right and it clicked, and suddenly it was something much different. An elevator. Down Houka and Shiro rode, still rereading the passage of interest. They'd always wondered what happened when a being that was clearly sentient was absorbed by a Kamui, like when Senketsu absorbed Junketsu when he became Senketsu Kisaragi. And if what this said was correct, then the answer to that question had some disturbing implications. The doors slid open, and red light spilled onto his face.

Vast server stacks stretched up the ceiling of this long chamber. But they weren't like ordinary computers, they all seemed to pulse in sync. Red veins trailed through them. Between them stretched skin-like filaments filled with an unearthly light. And in the center of the chamber, suspended from the ceiling above a large swiveling armchair with a vast set of inbuilt monitors: a huge, fleshy mass, like a brain made out of maroon and black synthetic smoothness. Wires trailed from it out to rest of the room and down to chair in a discordant mess. Occasionally lights would beam out from it too, and a faint hiss of steam liking a sleeping giant.

This was what demanded such secrecy. An organic supercomputer with a life-fiber neural network.

But how could he trust such a device? Well, that was quite simple. The neural network was his own. *This* was his Kamui.

[Good evening sirs,] A woman's voice filled Shiro's head, and he smiled. It was followed by a simulated voice over the speakers, for Houka's benefit. As soon as he entered this room, his mind felt clearer, looser. It was like there had been chains wrapped inside his skull and they had just come undone, his brain expanding to its full extent.

"I'll be honest Izanami, that doesn't suit you at all,"

[Aw c'mon, I was just trying to be dramatic. Liven your day up!] The voice chirped back. It was lively, high-pitched, and out of all the humans he knew it most reminded Shiro of Mako. In his mental image Izanami was a little blonde woman, just slightly plump with a cheery, confident smile, rosy cheeks, and a little snub nose. Sort of what he imagined his sister would look like, if he had one.

"It's about to become lively, I assure you. Just give me a sec and I'll show you." Shiro hurried over to his chair, grabbing a set of thin rubber tubes that hung down from the central processor. Houka helped him roll up his sleeve and insert them into a peripheral IV line digging into his stick-thin wrist. Soon enough blood flowed upward, turning the tubes a glossy wine-red. Shiro settled into the chair with a sigh.

"Just a few more months now," He said to Izanami.

[I know!] She gushed *[I'm so excited, I can't wait to see the world myself!]*

This was how Shiro knew his other half could be trusted with such a vast array of data, vast power to travel all across the internet at will (she was in every computer in the research complex by now). Just like Nonon's Kamui, she knew that none of that was as important as firsthand experience.

And she'd get that, soon enough. Ryuko never asked where the life-fibers she was sewing came from, and every time she worked on a bit of Shiro's clothing-form Kamui he disassembled a little bit of Izanami and sent her over. He'd told Aikuro and Tsumugu, of course, and Satsuki (although he didn't think she'd fully understood the implications), and Nonon too because Saiban had sniffed her out the very same day Shiro had finished her. But they were the only ones who knew – the rest of the research complex just thought she was a new operating system.

When the blood reached the central processing brain, the entire room erupted with blazing light like a campfire. Shiro closed his eyes as a surge of energy washed over his body, bringing with it a huge burst of thought and memory. Now he felt complete. When Houka or some other human didn't demand his attention, this was where he spent all his time.

[Ah, I see,] Izanami instantly understood his intent *[This passage... 'Once an... anchor... has been connected to the larger system, it cannot be permanently destroyed, only transferred*

between one network and another]

“That ‘anchor’ word gave me real trouble,” Houka said, “It’s used in places where you might use ‘soul’ or ‘consciousness’, but also in places where anchor does literally work.”

[Well, it might actually be anchor then. But as a metaphoric concept.]

“That’s what I thought. Some kind of aspect of the consciousness that lives in the life-fiber dimension.”

“We already know such a thing exists from Ryuko,” Shiro chimed in, “The real question is - ”

[- Whether they survive the destruction of a physical body]

“Precisely.”

[And I know who you’re worried about. One moment, I’ll pull up the relevant data...Okay! Here we have electromagnetic black-body emission spectra for Ryuko and Ragyo.]

Images flashed before Shiro’s eyes. The first, a scan of Ryuko from her first checkup. Then, one from before that, when she’d been comatose during the war. And then the last. The visible light part of the scan wasn’t especially interesting – blinding rainbow light, that iconic silhouette – they’d all seen it before. But the gamma rays, Shiro panned over to them, like plunging into the image. He couldn’t see gamma radiation, but Izanami could, and she converted it into a colored spectrum for him and Houka, who looked on from a monitor. It was almost incomprehensible, but when you stared long enough patterns became apparent from the kaleidoscopic image.

“Ah, yes, here’s the part that’s consistent,” Houka said, pointing, “This pattern, we see that in every scan we have of her. Her fingerprint, so to speak.”

Shiro nodded. Electromagnetic emission was part of the suite of phenomena that Izanami called “Aura” and Saiban called “scent”. Everything living emitted one, but life-fibers stood out. Their auras were far more intricate and artificial, you could identify a life-fiber creature down to the individual with them. Honnouji had been plastered with scanners back in the day.

“Show us the recent one of Ryuko, now.” Now the image cut to Ryuko, sitting on the operating chair, her blood spattering the floor. Shiro switched over to gamma, eyelids flickering.

“Oh wow, that’s complex,” Houka said appreciatively. “I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“All I see is Ryuko’s pattern...” Shiro said. “Maybe this was a false alarm.”

[Found it!] Izanami cried, flush both with pride for having seen what the humans could not and a stab of fear.

“Well fuck. Zoom and enhance, please.”

Shiro's mind's eye spun in. The dizzying waves of energy displayed in front of him were so convoluted there was no way his feeble human mind could have spotted it, but a supercomputer... There it was, faint, an undertone, like the cosmic background radiation. Ragyo's aura.

Shiro shuddered, a feeling oozing over him like he'd just stared down into deep, dark water and seen something move.

"Check the other Ryuko one, please."

"They are very closely related. Maybe it's a genetic trait."

Shiro and Houka waited while Izanami worked.

[I'm sorry. Take a look.] There could be no doubting it. That fingerprint wasn't there on the old one. It had been added, no *transferred* at some point between them. And there was only one point that could be. High above the stratosphere, far beyond the sight of human eyes. Ryuko probably didn't even know it had happened.

Houka sighed. "In theory, that's a remarkable discovery, isn't it?"

"In theory."

[Maybe that's just the life-fibers themselves? Maybe the consciousness was overwritten?]

"No," Shiro shook his head. "We've got plenty of records of nonsentient life-fibers – Goku uniforms, hybrid beasts – being absorbed. Their pattern isn't retained."

[Well, I tried to stay positive. I think we should get Ryuko in here for more tests.] If she could, Izanami would be shrugging right now. Despite that, subprocesses were already spinning out all the possible implications, working together with Shiro's mind.

"I think we should tell Satsuki," Houka said bluntly, "Although, ohh, she is *not* gonna be happy to hear she's back.

"But that's the thing though," Shiro said, "She's not *back*, she never went anywhere. Ryuko absorbed her."

Part 1 of: With all fitting splendor

Chapter Summary

Apologies for this one being so late - these last weeks have been crazy (I moved during that time, but this isn't a blog). Anyway I hope you enjoy, part 2 (UPDATE NOW OUT OF 3 I WROTE TOO MUCH AND IT'S VERY LATE) will be up in the next couple days.

Chapter Notes

Music for this one: https://youtu.be/QfQMM_cGW9I

I think this one might be my favorite from the entire OST, and it's so rarely used! Something about it feels very spiritual to me.

September 2066

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To understand Tsumugu Kinagase's feelings on the day that Ryuko distributed her Kamui, you have to understand the man himself as well.

He was a man of a straightforward, practical mindset – probably best suited to something equally practical like paramedic work or park ranging, or military service. Really all he wanted as a young man was to kick back with a beer and some friends after a hard day's work. But he went to university for physics anyway, because that was what his older sister Kinue did, and their parents before them. And, if you picked the right employer, you could make big bucks in the sciences. His family was far from poor. It was expected.

It was going fine, at first. Working for a Kiryuin missile plant even though he loathed them, but what could you do? But then Kinue had come home one Christmas with a tantalizing offer. She was working at a new lab. She couldn't say much about her work, but it was something really special. Something he just had to see for himself. Something that could change everything.

And so he followed her lead (as he so often did) and never looked back. Dr. Isshin Matoi's lab and Nudist Beach around it were just so mystifying. Even from the beginning the whole thing was like a bizarre parallel world, Tsumugu couldn't help being drawn in. Isshin's erratic genius, which led everyone to wonder what the hell had happened to the guy to make him this way, his little daughter, as much an experiment as any test tube, and of

course the life-fibers themselves. It was incredible, the things they could do. He'd never felt more alive then it did in those first years.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't last. Kinue was a strong, athletic woman, Isshin's most loyal and most effective assistant. At times Tsumugu thought she was in love with him (he couldn't understand why, though he did have a sort of eccentric charisma), she was certainly the only person who could calm him down from one of his rages, or talk to his little daughter like a child, not a tool. She was the obvious choice to wear their new battlesuit, to be Nudist Beach's champion. She was so brave, so faithful as she stepped into the test chamber, pricked her finger, and let the Kamui do what it would. Just as life-fibers would be the cause of all their problems, so would they be the solution.

There must have been warnings. How could they have been so blind?

He couldn't return to the lab after that day. Isshin wasn't just eccentric, he was mad! All his underlings were deluded. Mankind was never meant to dabble with such powers. And that poor little girl... they could already see the monster beginning to fight inside her. She was starting to scare the other kids at school, and nobody knew what to do about it. It was straightforward, practical calculation: life-fibers were evil, and had to be destroyed down to the last thread.

But you didn't just walk away from Nudist Beach. Tsumugu was in too deep, knew too much. He couldn't return to the normal world and wouldn't even if he could. Taking down the Kiryuins was too important. And besides he'd make a friend, Aikuro, and he wasn't about to leave him alone with a rapidly destabilizing Isshin. He'd helped Tsumugu land his first girlfriend, he owed him that much. So Tsumugu switched over to the guerilla side of Nudist Beach, started associating with hardliners who also wanted to destroy all life-fibers. What else was he supposed to do?

The rest, of course, was history. He was sure nobody could ever wear a Kamui, until Ryuko did it. Then he was sure only a hybrid could wear one, until Satsuki did. Then he thought only humans with the sort of insane, machinic drive Satsuki had would be able to survive it. Then Nonon managed the feat too. And he couldn't dismiss that. He couldn't dismiss the fact that Senketsu *had* talked to him.

Shiro was sure he knew what that meant. Just as life-fibers would be the cause of all their problems, so would they be the solution. Ryuko had experienced something truly special with Senketsu, something which deserved to be explored. And the thing was, after everything Tsumugu had seen, he had to admit that might be right. Which would make Isshin right by extent. Which would make Kinue right too.

Or it might just kill him. He'd seen that happen too.

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So naturally, Tsumugu was filled with a sort of nervous anticipation, the same kind that came before a fight. Usually he'd have lit a cigarette to help, but this was a televised ceremony. Wouldn't look good to have a national hero indulge a vice like that on camera.

And that is what he was now, and the ceremony was a pretty big reminder. He and rest of the group that were receiving their Kamuis were standing in the center of a vast concrete stadium – Aikuro, Uzu, Houka, Shiro, Ira, even Rei, and of course himself – and the roar of the crowd was pretty omnipresent. Hell of a place to be strangled to death by a life-fiber monster. It seemed so incongruous with the setting that Tsumugu almost couldn't believe anything might go wrong.

That was definitely part of Satsuki's plan. Legitimize the whole thing. Show the world how strong they were. Life-fibers were here to stay, about time the public get a good look at them.

The ceremony began with some words from Satsuki herself, of course. In the dead center of the stadium there was a low, pyramidal concrete stage, and she stood on it flanked by Ryuko and Nonon.

"... I have nothing but gratitude for the valor of our servicemen- and women," she intoned, "But we are moving into a new age. It is no longer acceptable for the youth of our country to risk death to protect us when there is another option. We must do better. It's time to begin the disassembly of our traditional military and let them come home. That is what the Kamui Corps will mean for you," This was met with resounding applause, which only made sense. *Man, the old Satsuki would throw a fit if she could hear herself now,* Tsumugu thought, *I know we talk all the time about how much she's changed, but I wonder if a part of her doesn't wish she could have it both ways.*

Satsuki went on, "Unfortunately, in times such as these this is not just a moral imperative but a practical one. Against the surviving followers of Ragyo traditional military might will be useless, a liability. And that makes the risk of not creating a response all the greater. You have all put your faith in us before, under far more dire circumstances. I ask only that you do so again."

Then it was Nonon's turn. On a plinth in front of them there was a pair of crossed ceremonial swords, and as Nonon stepped up to it she laid a gloved hand them and the other over her heart. She beamed into the cameras as she spoke, "As leader of Kamui Corps, I swear to always act with valor, wisdom, and clarity in all my missions. I swear to protect the vision of the new government and the safety of the people, both in Japan and abroad." Short and to the point, Tsumugu could appreciate that.

Discussion about who should be the leader hadn't taken long – Nonon was obviously the most experienced with Kamui (except Ryuko and Satsuki, who'd both made it abundantly clear they were *not* part of this new fighting force) and she desperately wanted it. What did Saiban want though? Who knew what was going on behind those flat yellow eyes.

I can't believe I'm going to have that stuck to me for... well, the rest of my life, I guess.

Retired from warfare or not, Ryuko was still there, and she was still the one the public really wanted to see. The Girl who Saved the World appeared so infrequently in public, and never before like this. From the bleachers she probably looked like a very imposing businesswoman in a black skirtsuit with golden buttons and epaulettes. It was the

first outfit she'd actually made for herself, and it was originally going to be much less extravagant. But then Satsuki had intervened and told her that, illogical though it might seem, people wanted to see the side of her that could take charge and own the room (or stadium, as it happened). And Satsuki saw right through Ryuko's protests that that side of her didn't exist. She knew Ryuko too well.

Tsumugu could hardly believe this was the same little girl who'd crept around Dr. Isshin's mansion with that lost look on her face.

But Ryuko was nervous, Tsumugu and the others down in the stadium could tell. That only made sense, with the eyes of the nation on her (in something other than a gladiatorial arena). There was a chant of "Lady Ryuko!" echoing from around the stadium. *Sound like a lot of people chanting. I thought I told Satsuki I didn't want the religious nutjobs here, (Satsuki had tried her best, but plenty had slipped through the security checkpoints) I wonder what they think I am – goddess, heroine, princess?*

Ryuko started her part of speech with a sigh, "I bet there are a lot of you out there who are worried right now. I know, I would be too. Life-fibers are the bad guys, right?" The words weren't exactly Ryuko's, Satsuki and Rei and Aikuro had all tried their best to workshop her script. But eventually Ryuko's insistence that they write something she would actually say won out. "And I wish I could tell you this was completely safe, that there was no chance it would end in disaster. But I can't. Kamui are dangerous. But they aren't evil."

"I wish I could explain what it's like to wear one," She went on, "but I can't do that either. When I first met my Kamui, Senketsu, just for a moment I thought he was some kinda demon, but the moment I put him on I knew better. It felt like every muscle in my body just got a good long stretch, but it was more than that. In my head, again I can't explain it quite right, but it was like where there was just me now the two of us shared space. I don't know how you can be calm at the same time that you're absolutely livid, confused what's even going on at the same time you understand everything perfectly, it's nonsense! But it works," Ryuko took a pause; at first she'd just been reciting the script from memory, but now her voice was growing emotional. "I wouldn't have gotten half as far as I did without him – and not just his powers. I thought I was being possessed, but instead I met someone better than a friend: a part of myself I never knew I was missing. I only wish I realized that sooner."

Was Nonon tearing up? She couldn't already feel the same way, could she? Tsumugu felt even more nervous now, bare feet shifting under his silky ceremonial robe. Was he rushing into this too fast just because they needed soldiers? Did he even want someone else in his head?

"That is what you are seeing now. Not just the unveiling of a new weapon. The people you see before you are about to become whole."

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The rest of ceremony went by through a repeated ritual. It was the same process for each of them: Ryuko placed their Kamui on the plinth and called them up, they shed their robes, she wished them luck in some way, they pricked their finger, and then the Kamui played its part. After that, whenever the flames settled, Nonon would give them their

weapons and welcome them into the Kamui Corps. Ryuko had complained that doing the same thing each time made it less special, but on this one Satsuki won out, and Tsumugu was glad. He was going last – the order was Aikuro, Uzu, Houka, Shiro, Ira, Rei, then him – so it gave him plenty of time to rehearse it in his mind, and to observe.

“Aikuro Mikisuki, president of the *Kinue Kinagase Memorial Research Complex* and former Nudist Beach special operative, step forward!” Aikuro shed his robe without hesitation – even if they hadn’t spent years in Nudist Beach, Tsumugu knew he’d always just been wired that way – and Ryuko fixed him dead in the eyes to avoid looking at the rest of him. He winked back. “You introduced me to the world of life-fibers, and to Senketsu. Not to say I approve of your methods, but y’know”( This part was not recorded – Ryuko could say whatever she wanted.) “Feels like years ago. D’ya think this is fitting or ironic, that our roles are reversed now?”

Aikuro shrugged, “You’ve come a long way. I never expected it would come to this. But then, surprises are your thing. Yeah, I think it’s fitting.”

“Have you chosen a name?” Ryuko said as she clicked the microphone on

“I have: Kamui Nekketsu!”

“Hot-blood, eh? It figures... Very well! From this day forth your Kamui shall be known as Kamui Nekketsu. Check ‘er out!” Ryuko gingerly removed the a cloth from the plinth to reveal her handiwork. In its powered down form, Nekketsu was a white suit with generous accents of deep purple and voluminous, popped collars. Somehow it already seemed just a little disheveled, and on closer inspection it was not pure white but had thin inlaid patterns of shiny silver thread, little interlocking starbursts that almost blended in and gave the whole thing a smooth, glinting texture. Aikuro grinned.

“Good luck!” Ryuko mouthed as she handed him a pinprick. His motions were smooth and confident, as if there was showmanship in dropping blood on a Kamui – but then there was a reason he was going first. From the VIP seating Mako and Mataro started cheering as an odd magenta light seemed to appear from nowhere and fill the stage. Aikuro flinched back as if struck, holding his hands up like he’d never seen them before. The overpowering energy of the Kamui flooded his body

*[What’s happening? Wha- who are you?]* Aikuro now fully sprung back, holding a hand up to his temple as a sweet, wispy woman’s voice echoed in his skull *[Wait, sir, don’t go! I don’t want to go back to sleep again!]*

It made sense, but Aikuro hadn’t thought of it before. Of course the Kamui would be more frightened than him. And he had a job to do.

He took a deep breath and extended a hand, “I’m not going anywhere. Let me put you on, and I’ll explain everything.”

Nekketsu snaked up his arm like a sea slug, reforming onto him as the air coursed with lightning.

*[A perfect fit. How about that?]*. The flesh-fabric barrier fell. A mountain suddenly rose under Aikuro's feet, even as Ryuko stayed in the same place, grinning and pumping a celebratory fist in front of him he could feel his body soaring up, away from the stadium and into space. Weightless.

“YAAAHAAHAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!”

In a blinding flash that shorted out every camera in the stadium, deep indigo flames sprung up around him in a vast column. Ryuko and Nonon suddenly moved faster than the human eye could see – Ryuko was so close that she had to leap back or her clothes would be scorched off, and Nonon grabbed Satsuki and pulled her back a little bit.

“That looked promising,” Satsuki nodded as the flames died down, leaving the sound of Aikuro hyperventilating as the only noise in the stadium. Everyone in the crowd was either covering their eyes from the blinding light or utterly transfixed.

“Hey, you good?” Ryuko shouted to the silhouette of Aikuro, hunched over in the fading fire catching his breath.

*[Now that's much better]* Nekketsu sighed as he straightened up *[ok, now, where are we, what's going on?]*

“One sec, let me... Ohh-ho-ho *awesome!*” Aikuro said, looking down at himself. Nekketsu's transformed shape kept some semblance to a suit, but if he hadn't seen her powered down Aikuro could've been fooled so easily. The popped collars had fanned out into a vast man like a manta-ray's fins, the ends of which swooped down to connect to his shoulders. Despite being huge and ostentatious, they were flexible too, and it was there that Nekketsu's eyes were, round and oddly surprised looking and far redder than Saiban's. The indigo tie had become a web of wire-thin lines that traced down his torso, glowing and pulsing as they outlined each muscle. Below that they connected to a speedo like hip component (Ryuko was a little pleased to see that, despite there being some glowing patterns on it, it was less exaggerated than she'd feared. But then, a giant spiky codpiece would've been intensely impractical for combat.) Nekketsu's boots were thin and pointed, with glowing filamentous wires extending from them too, framing the contours of his legs. The arms were a bit more covered, and the wide collar connected to armored shoulderpieces with huge sets of interlocking vents that huffed steam out over his arms, and wide silky sleeves tipped in black gloves with talons on each finger. The horns that cropped from his blue hair as it whipped around were short and curved, with a sort of webbing behind them that made them look thicker from the sides. Judging by how brilliantly Nekketsu glowed, everyone's initial assumption had been correct – Aikuro had synchronized with her immediately.

*So this is my creation*, Ryuko trilled with a strange joy when she saw that Aikuro was talking to Nekketsu, *Wow, I can't believe I made this – I made a whole real person!*

*[What-wait, did you not **know** what would happen when you put me on? You knew, right?]*

“Yeah, I knew, but I didn't get how it would feel.”

*[I'm so confuse- okay, I'll shut up now – oohh dear, there are a lot of creatures in the audience looking at us!]*

“Don’t be scared of them, they’re no danger. Look – they’re applauding us.”

*[Really? Why?]*

“You might not know it, but waking you up was an very rare accomplishment.” He smiled when he felt a warm, fuzzy feeling bubbling up from somewhere – not his feeling, but sort of like a parallel. *I guess even Kamui like hearing that they’re special.* Nekketsu did quiet down now. There was so much going on, and she just needed a moment to observe. When Ryuko and Saiban got close enough that she could feel their auras, familiarity instantly drew her to them like a magnet – *Oh wow, these ones are like me!* She thought. Without realizing she’d done it, she sent an invisible greeting to them. Ryuko felt it like a trembling pricking of the hairs on the back of her neck, and it told her they were ready.

“Aikuro Mikisuki and Kamui Nekketsu!” She shouted, and the crowd erupted in applause.

Aikuro laughed for joy, and down below the stage Tsumugu wondered if he’d ever seen him so happy.

For the first time in forever, he was alive.

And every down below couldn’t wait for their turn, even Tsumugu.

## Part 2 of: With all fitting splendor

### Chapter Summary

Okay I lied. There will be a third part as soon as I can. Because yes I absolutely am doing every single character in full detail I do not care, they all deserve their time. It's long, yes, but if you're this far in honestly you've gotta be used to that.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With Aikuro and Nekketsu's introduction having gone so well, the atmosphere in the stadium began to change from solemn to breezy and jubilant. Superhumans, like from the pages of a comic book, in front of the audience's very eyes! The fact that it was the Heroes of Honnouji themselves felt fitting. This was a country still very enamored with hierarchies (despite Satsuki's best efforts) and the towering personages down there on stage were so high up on the hierarchy that all this talk of serving the public and trusting that the Kamui were safe was just a formality. Well, considering that the Nekketsu *had* worked, it was a formality. If she hadn't there might have been room for some consideration.

They were getting the show they'd payed for. The tickets were free to whoever reserved them online, but plenty of the audience had paid incredible sums to scalpers, and some had still been turned away at the door for looking like cultists or potential terrorists. People from around the still-civilized parts of the world had done a lot to get here and they felt it was worth it. History was being made.

There was a sort of low, thunderous noise from the audience as Aikuro received his weapon and was "knighted" by Nonon. He couldn't pretend to be surprised by it; he'd designed it himself. A bow with a hardened life-fiber blade along its edge, it could detach into two curved daggers with the glowing life-fiber string withdrawing into a little notch. It came with a small set of arrows with two-pronged hardened life-fiber arrowheads shaped like shears and a whole load more normal steel ones.

He couldn't wait to try it out. Strength tests in the lab indicated that, with this bow and Kamui super-strength, he'd be able to launch arrows at speeds competitive with railguns. But more than that, Aikuro immediately understood why Nonon had been so desperate to go on her first mission. His whole body felt like a tightly coiled spring, and who knew how fast it would fly if he let it loose.

*I feel like a spoiled kid. "Mom? When's the ceremony gonna be over?" Aikuro chuckled to himself. Geez. Probably for the best then that I went first and not one of the actual kids.*

*[What happens now, sir... er, what do I call you?]* Aikuro was far more surprised than he should've been that Nekketsu picked up on his newfound boredom and mirrored it. She felt a desperate need to run wild too, but more than that, Aikuro couldn't ignore that she had all the context the world around her as a newborn infant.

Fortunately, her mind was much quicker than an infant's, and as Aikuro took his place behind Satsuki and began whispering an introduction to her he was greeted with the most unusual experience of Nekketsu searching through his memories, replaying moments from his childhood he thought he'd forgotten like a clip show. The experience of having your memories repeatedly occur to you without your conscious decision really defies description.

*Well this is just bizarre. She'd better stop doing that.*

*[Doing what?]* Legitimate curiosity from Nekketsu. She had no idea this might be considered rude.

*You know what? Nevermind.*

~~~~~

Uzu practically skipped up the stairs as Ryuko called out his introduction, "Uzu Sanageyama, Kendo World Champion, State Diplomat, and former Honnouji Academy Athletic Committee Chairman!"

Uzu's Kamui was a gi, exactly as Ryuko had planned. The nearly white aqua-blue of the shirt and the deeper blue-green of the Hakama were both traced through with geometric green and golden patterns, the whole thing was silky and gilded and matched with Saiban to a degree Ryuko hadn't even planned (and which probably annoyed Nonon to no end).

Ryuko clicked off her mic, "I heard you stalemated Nui without a Goku Uniform once, right?"

Uzu grinned, "Oho yeah. That was a tough one, let me tell you."

"Yeah, you're gonna do just fine with her. You excited?"

"What kinda question is that?" Uzu groaned, as if he was exasperated. "We're finally gonna get our good rematch, you know that?"

"Sure, but listen, there's a lot more to be excited about than that. Are you ready for everything it means to wear a Kamui?"

"Oh, that. Well yeah, it'll be cool having her in my head. We'll get along great, you'll see."

"Well it's more... ah, what the hell, you'll figure it out," Ryuko handed him the pinprick. "What's the name gonna be?"

"Kamui Seijitsu!"

“Honor, nice. A ‘concept’ name, like Nonon’s Saiban, right?”

“Oh, well sure, I suppose.”

Ryuko looked at him skeptically, behind her, Nonon was watching him intently. She’d been expecting him to fuck it up somehow, but so far...

“And you expect me to believe you came up with that without any input from Nonon, huh?”

“Well, maybe not exactly,” Uzu raised an awkward hand behind his head, and Ryuko noticed that even his armpits were hairless, like a swimmers. *I seriously hope Nonon didn’t tell him about that conversation.*

“Well I like it anyway. Seijitsu’s all yours now, good luck!” Ryuko took a step back as she tossed him the little needle they were using as a pinprick, and he snatched it from the air with Shingantsu assisted reflexes.

When Uzu dropped his blood onto Seijitsu, the reaction was immediate. He’d seen how Aikuro had clutched at his head when Nekketsu first spoke to him, and resolved not to do the same. But he did it anyway

*[More! More! I need more **blood!**]* The voice was emphatic, melodic, and on the deep side for a woman. The type that could fill a room, but which also sounded clearly like a young woman filled with enthusiasm for life. Uzu would later swear he’d heard a voice like that before, but for now – *[More more more more more more **more!**]*

“Whoa, shit!”

[You!] Seijitsu noticed him then, and Uzu had a most surreal experience like seeing himself in a security TV at the department store, *[You gave me your blood! I need more!]*

Uzu had to take a stammering moment to pull himself together. He knew what part of the script this was, “W-well then, let me put you on, and I can give you more.”

[Oh! Simple enough!] In one fluid motion, Seijitsu leapt up onto Uzu. But when it came to wrapping herself around Uzu, she had a bit more trouble.

“Wha-hey calm down!” He shouted as Seijitsu scrambled around, up and down his torso and around his arms and head in a big wad. *Like an actual damn monkey!* He thought with a chuckle. The initial bout of panic he’d detected from Seijitsu was fading, now she was just struggling with sheer overexcitement and bewilderment. Uzu couldn’t help but feel an instant sympathy towards that.

Nonon, on the other hand, recoiled with a “hrrk!” noise from her throat. *And there he goes, typical.*

[Don’t be so harsh] Saiban said, *[His Kamui is a lively one.]*

Eventually Uzu managed to straighten Seijitsu out, and then things could proceed as normal. His pillar of flames was brilliant emerald green, and he emerged from it to thunderous applause, grinning like a moron.

Seijitsu's transformed form turned out to be completely unlike the gi she started out as. The only thing covering most of Uzu's body was a thin leathery skirt like a loincloth, longer in the front than on the sides giving it a shape like bat's wings, and a mess of geometrically curling green ribbons that trailed from toes clad in steel toed sandals up to his shoulders. But those shoulders, they made up for the rest easily. Huge curved pauldrons like devil's horns, from which Seijitsu's orange-green eyes beamed out, appearing furrowed with determination. All the gold ended up there too, in decorous trimmings that made the whole thing glint. They were connected by a high collar and a breastplate that extended down to around heart level and no lower. They also matched to the tiny little curved horns that rose from his erratic mess of hair, which danced flamelike above his face.

The only thing that seemed to carry over was the hakama, which had migrated over his shoulders into a voluminous cape of the same color and pattern it had before. It also wrapped around to his left arm like a renaissance fencer's cape and since it was made of life-fibers it would be plenty strong to fulfill the same purpose - a shield.

"Yoooo...", Uzu murmured as he admired himself. Seijitsu had actually quieted down almost immediately – she got her blood, now everything was alright. But Uzu couldn't.

"Oh Jesus, he looks like a drunk tailgater running around in a cape and underwear – hey what the Hell do you think you doing!" Uzu hadn't shown the same restraint as Aikuro, and he leapt up many, many stories with a whooping laugh.

"Get down here!" Nonon screeched, but Satsuki laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Try to keep you voice down. Your microphone picked up that last part." Nonon went beet red and hid her face. Oh, Uzu was dead soon as she got her hands on him, Kamui or not.

When Uzu landed, it was with great chagrin that Nonon handed him his blade. A finely made Katana with his preferred specs for balance and flex and the same hilt design he used on all his shinai recreated, it was a perfect tool for a master to work his art. But more than that, it disconnected right down the seam into two half-katana, for when cross-cutting would be needed. Normally he would have been overjoyed with such an impressive gift, but with Seijitsu it almost felt like an afterthought.

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For Ira's Kamui, Ryuko had started out by thinking about what kind of military uniform best suited him, and the answer eventually occurred to her – a knight's armor. Not fanciful full-plate, but something more reasonable, with a gilded tunic emblazoned with his family crest (a stylized depiction of a forge and anvil) right beneath its shut eyes. The tunic lay over brassy chainmail, gauntlets, and greaves, with a huge belt covered in layers of intertwining silver ivy. Plenty of extra room beneath for him to wear an armored breastplate



from his family ironworks, as he like to do. It would get sucked up by the Kamui when he powered up (Ryuko had often wondered “Where do my sneakers go when we transform?” but Senketsu had never had a good answer), but in powered-down form it would still provide extra protection.

The funny thing for Ira was that he hadn’t really wanted a Kamui at all, until people started talking to him. Especially Mako, who had been cheering breathlessly for Aikuro and Uzu and now tried to be even louder. Her two favorite people in the whole world, what could be better? And Mako met a new contender for favorite person every day so that really was saying something. But considering that, Ryuko started her little speech to Ira by thanking him for giving it a shot. “You won’t be disappointed, trust me.”

Ira nodded, “Even though I have no intention of returning to active duty, we are all still servants of our country and humanity – that hasn’t changed. And I have no doubt this Kamui will only further improve my skills at that charge,” Ira smiled then, “And besides, I couldn’t be the only one of the Elites not to get one, could I? Even I’m not made of stone.”

Ryuko chuckled, “No, but a little part of you is made of life-fiber now... I know you’ll take good care of – uh, what did you want to name her?”

“Kamui Tekketsu.”

“Tekketsu – means Ironblood, eh? That’s great – really classic Kamui name there.”

“Oh, well thank you,” Ira and Mako had actually spent a long time brainstorming that, so Ryuko had some guess as to what it was going to be from Mako’s constant texts. But it was still good to hear she liked it. “Together we shall be a bulwark in defense of peace and justice!”

“Hell yeah you will,” Ryuko said as she, once again, passed over the pinprick. Ira didn’t feel nearly as shocked by the voice entering his head as either Aikuro or Uzu had. He stood bolt upright at attention as a silky suave voice resounded through his skull.

*[Well, it about time you came for me, Ira Gamagoori]* She said with a smirk that Ira could feel.

“How do you already know my name?” He gasped.

*[I’m a quick study.]*

“Sheesh, and you’re supposed to be my opposite? What’s that say about me?”

“Well, not quite your opposite, technically.”

*[I suspect Mother’s right, you know.]*

That took Ira by such surprise that he, almost involuntarily, mouthed the word “mother”. The implications of that... But Ryuko, even with her supersenses, completely missed that with how focused she was on Tekketsu herself.

*[Ira, I will subside into unconsciousness shortly with the amount of blood I have.]*

“Oh right. Here, let me.” He extended a hand to her, and she drifted slowly, wispily up to him. The pillar of flame was deep, metallic orange this time, and Ira’s scream one more of surprise than exultance at how powerful the rush of breaking the flesh-fabric barrier was. But he survived just fine. More than fine.

In the moments while the flames died down, the only sound in the stadium was thousands of jaws hitting the floor. Because somehow, impossibly, Ira was ten feet tall now.

Ryuko had always thought that was just some trick of the eye, like Satsuki’s lights, but no, this time he really had grown. You only had to look at that great blocky jaw, wide as a bear trap and outlined by a thin strip of orange, glowing metal, to see it for yourself. Shiro and Houka in particular were both floored. They had no idea *THAT* was possible. And besides that, Tekkestu seemed designed to make him look even bulkier on top of that.

His shoulders and arms were entirely covered in interlocking plates of brassy metal that resembled impossibly roided muscles. If it weren’t for Tekketsu’s eyes peering out it would be easy to think there was muscle under there as well. The entire thing whirred and dozens of vents opened seemingly from nowhere to huff massive clouds of steam.

The bottom half of Ira’s torso was covered in the same sort of metal above skintight shorts, and his feet and lower legs were equally well armored, making it look like he was barefoot and had stepped in a sort of metallic mud.

“Well, that went pretty smoothly,” Ryuko observed as Nonon handed him his blade. It was a good thing Saiban boosted her strength a little even while powered down or else she’d have had no chance of lifting it. It was a Katana of massive size with a strong curve to it, and when Aikuro and Tsumugu had been making it they thought even for a guy as big as Ira it would be on the unwieldy side. But when he was *freakishly* huge, yeah, it looked about right. And more than that, it came with a set of ten razor sharp talons for his fingers, for cross-cutting. Those would have to be resized though.

“Well, it seems like straightforwardness is a trait we both share,” Ira smiled, and then suddenly - “ - Ooof!”

“Iiiiiiraaaaa!”

“Mako! Where’d you come from!” Ira was nearly bowled over even at ten-feet tall by a full tilt dive from Mako, who had leapt from her seat and come sprinting over at some point. There was a resounding “Aaawwww” from the audience as Ira laid a hand the size of a t-bone steak on her shoulder.

“OhmyGod you turned into a *giant!*” Mako gushed, “That’s so cool! You’re like one of those sponges you put in water and grows except with a Kamui! How’s it work? What’s the trick?”

“If I knew, I’m sure I’d tell you,” He chuckled.

“Hey! She’s messing everything up!” Nonon hissed. What did she expect with this group of amateurs? She’d whip them into shape as their commanding officer, that was for sure. Was a little shorwmanship too much to ask?

“I don’t think there’s much use removing her,” Satsuki chided, “Isn’t that right, Ryuko?”

“I mean, you’re welcome to try if you want,” Ryuko waved to Mako, who hung resolutely on Ira’s tree-trunk arm like a Koala – entirely off the ground. “But even I’ve never had much luck with that.”

*Wow, they’re all getting along so great, Ryuko thought with an odd swirl of pride and... something else. I only wish ours had gone so smoothly, Senketsu. But if all I can do is help the others find the same special bond, I guess that’ll have to be enough.*

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Houka’s and Shiro’s went by without much trouble at all. Both of them were entirely eager, willing guinea pigs in their own experiment, especially since it was going very well. At this point, accolades for their research were basically meaningless, they’d already gotten them all. This was pure curiosity driving them on.

“The name I’ve chosen is Kamui Misaki,” Houka declared, and Ryuko tilted her head in confusion.

“Just an ordinary human name? Interesting choice.”

“Well, Shiro told me that a Kamui is like a sibling, right? Well, when I was a kid I used to have this imaginary friend – single mother, no friends, you know the story.”

“Yeah, I can relate,” *Oh yeah, that was the reason he started scamming online in the first place, wasn’t it? To provide for his mother. He just couldn’t stop there, is all.*

“Well, I would pretend that she was my sister, and I called her Misaki. It’s just a little nod to that, really. I’m not very good with names.”

“No, I like it, it’s cute. You never talk about your childhood much, I’m just surprised.”

“Eh, it’s all in the past. You wouldn’t be impressed anyway,” Houka leaned in with a smile like he was sharing a secret, “I spent a lot of time on the computer.”

“Riiight,” Ryuko chuckled. These little exchanges were fast becoming her favorite part of the whole ceremony. *Why am I so special that I get this moment all to myself. Houka and the other guys made these as much as I did, I just did all the grunt work. All the hard work, let’s be real.*

Kamui Misaki was based on an old European military uniform, the sort of thing napoleon might have worn. Bright blue with golden tassels on the epaulettes and gold cords down the smooth surface of the coat, and ultra-soft moleskin gloves in sky blue with little

flowers traced on them. Ryuko had gone for a sort of “gentleman warrior” look with this one, and on Houka’s lanky form she knew it would work wonders. And, much to Houka’s glee, it had a very tall, fur lined turtleneck collar.

When Misaki first awoke both she and Houka were momentarily stunned by the sensory overload. Apparently her supersenses were on par with Ryuko’s, a good step up from the rest of the Kamui. And then when that got done with Houka stood there explaining everything for so long that she nearly fell asleep again.

But when the sapphire flames died down, they wasted no time with rest of the ceremony. Misaki’s transformed mode turned things around – the other guys had Kamui that mostly covered their limbs and left their torso free, but Houka’s chest down to his thighs was covered in a skintight blue material that seemed to glow all on its own. Only two oval slits on the side showed and skin at all. But on the other hand his arms and legs were mostly free but for large, sharp looking gauntlets and spiked combat boots and the wires to connect them all to the main body. The shoulders were rounded like pearls and quite smooth and sleek, with large vents positioned between them on Houka’s back.

His weapons were a pair of fencing rapiers with elaborate cage hilts. Simple, elegant, he’d already been practicing with them for months. Since he’d already explained everything important to Misaki - who he was, what she was, why and how she’d been created (he gave more credit to Ryuko than he’d meant to with that when he sensed some sort of familiarity between them) – he was able to take his place behind Nonon and Satsuki with suitable poise.

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As for Shiro’s, well, he’d already had Izanami for month’s now. Ryuko thought that naming her after a Shinto goddess was fitting, a little arrogant maybe, but fitting. *Maybe we deserve a little more arrogance than you think, considering you never noticed Izanami was already conscious while you made her new form*, Shiro cackled to himself.

*[Now don’t be prickly,]* Izanami chirped, suddenly filling his head with her relaxing presence not milliseconds after he spilled his blood on her, *[Mother did a fine job on me. What’s wrong, you don’t want me calling you that?]*

*Oh you little devil, you know I can’t speak to you now or it’ll give the game up.* He made a big show of looking shocked and stunned instead.

Izanami giggled, *[You’re frustrated! How fun for me.]*

Izanami had been remade into a tall, velvety coat in a deep maroon with a modern military uniform beneath it. A lab coat. Of course she would make a lab coat. Shiro wasn’t even mad it was too perfect.

*[Shiro my dear, would you be so kind as to put me on?]* Shiro wanted to scream that the drama didn’t fit her at all, but he could do nothing but hold his tongue.

When he did put her on though, he screamed in pure pain. It was a briefest burst as lipstick-red flames enveloped him, but afterwards a different, even worse agony came. His lungs could barely draw a breath, his stomach churned, he couldn't feel his legs, he could hardly even see. His scrawny body could barely withstand the shock of wearing a Kamui. He sunk to his knees and Ryuko rushed over to him in a panic.

*[I'm so sorry! I'd calculated there would be a risk (Izanami was still linked to her supercomputer component deep in the research lab's basement) but the odds were in our favor!]*

"Don't apologize," Shiro spat through gritted teeth. There was a metallic taste in his mouth, and blood trickled from his nose and ears. "This is what I get for skipping so many physical training sessions."

"Are you alright? We've got ambulance coming over now," Ryuko called, and her voice penetrated through the soup surrounding him.

"I'm fine. Izanami! Help me stand." The crowd applauded when he finally managed it. Like Uzu's Seijitsu, Izanami in her transformed shape had flowing capes and skirts, but they were parted. Eight prehensile arms made of thin fabric, and on each, an eye. This Ryuko hadn't expected. Who'd heard of a Kamui where the eyes weren't on the shoulders? He still had shoulder spikes, a set of thin prongs far too thin to hold an eye, to match the thin, straight horns that cropped from his blond hair. The rest of his body was also enveloped in a glowing skintight material with holes and swirling patterns revealing skin in seemingly random shapes.

His blades, also of his own devising, were long, thin, and hooked, with a second inner blade that slid out like a pocketknife for very efficient cross-cutting. He'd need to make more – one for each extra arm. But for the moment it was all he could do to keep standing with Houka and Uzu holding him up by the shoulders.

*Okay, I think I see the thing about arrogance now.*

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"Rei Hououmaru, reformed servant of Ragyo Kiryuin and current economic and cultural advisor to the cabinet." *Reformed servant of Ragyo*. It was enough to make anyone nervous. As Rei climbed the stage, she was sure tomatoes would be thrown, but there was nothing but applause and a dull murmur.

With her supersensitive hearing Ryuko picked out little snippets. "Isn't that the woman Lady Ryuko is dating?" "I heard they got engaged secretly, Lady Ryuko hates paparazzi. It's just a rumor though." "Oh! I saw her on TV with Lady Satsuki! She's very well spoken." "Poor dear, I hope Ragyo wasn't too awful."

Ryuko smirked as she unveiled Rei's Kamui. It was harder to place what this one was based on - a tight fitting bodice made of cream yellow metal, a silver-green jacket with lavender buttons over it, a long skirt with lavender embroidery and tights ending in high

heeled sandals, and something between a cape and a shawl over one shoulder. It looked vaguely Greco-roman, but that didn't stop her from admiring its unique beauty.

Until - , "Lot of lavender, I know. I hope it's not a reminder. But you gotta admit, it is your color." That honestly annoyed Rei. *That's all I get? I was hoping for a speech, not just a cute little look. I'm sorry Ryuko, but I'm way too preoccupied to have a "moment" right now.* Truth be told, Rei had been annoyed at Ryuko for about a week now in that minor way that could be tolerated and eventually went away. She'd been so picky and demanding during the planning for this event. First time Rei had seen her really lean into the Kiryuin diva she kept buried. And Satsuki had been oddly permissive for most things, which didn't help.

"No, no I don't mind that at all. He's beautiful, really."

"Sweet. Did you pick out a name?"

"I did. Kamui Furashada," when Ryuko looked confused, she explained, "It means redemption in Somali, my native language. This feels like coming full circle on that, I thought the name should too."

"Oh wow! That's so clever!" Ryuko gushed with one of those big, toothy, squinty smiles that made Rei forget to be annoyed for a minute. Long enough for her to eagerly spill some blood onto that pretty lavender shawl. And she had to laugh when the voice, strident and bubbly, popped into her head like a lightbulb turning on.

[Hi! Who are you? I'd introduce myself, but I'm afraid I just woke up! Say, do you think you could spare just a little more blood until I get my bearings?] What the hell is this? Were the other Kamui so... upbeat?

[Kamui? What does that mean?]

*The other Kamui could **definitely** not hear thoughts.*

[I'm hearing your thoughts right now?]

Describing the rest of this conversation would be difficult and pointless. Thoughts can run in many directions at once, much faster than speech, and in mere seconds Rei had convinced Furashada to climb aboard her naked body. And when she did, the flesh-fabric barrier fell with such a thunderous crash that the entire stage was consumed and everybody had to leap back, carrying Mako and Satsuki with them, or else get scorched. A brilliant whirlwind of sparks and cracking plasma spun out around Rei as she screamed in exultant joy.

"Holy shit, I knew you said Rei was highly compatible," Ryuko said as she helped Shiro back onto the stage (he was feeling a bit better but still quite feeble), "But that was insane."

"This is quite the day for discoveries," Shiro grunted as he scrambled the rest of the way.

“Rei, how’re ya doin’?” Ryuko called over. Rei was standing there, head upturned like she was relaxing in the shower, great branching horns like antlers poking through her frizzy hair, crackling with electricity. The air still stirred around her, kicking up debris and pulsing with heat like a mirage.

“If this is how *Rei* reacts... I need to get Mako into a Kamui one of these days,” Shiro chuckled.

Rei turned to look at them now. She *had* been lost in her own world – communicating with Furashada was just so easy – and she’d almost forgotten to look at herself. Diaphanous, glowing lace trailed off her limbs and the huge, smoothly curving lavender-ivory shoulderspikes, massive tusks that erupted as if from her own soft skin. The fabric that swept around her breasts and down the center of her stomach to a skirt of leathery webbing, longer in the back than the front making a sort of tail, was also glowing with patterns that seemed to project a couple centimeters off her skin and shift slowly.

When she saw Ryuko, she smiled with glassy, tear filled eyes. *Now* she understood. This was what Ryuko had experienced. This was enlightenment. Not Ragyo’s false promises and empty ideologies. Here. Utterly in the moment. As real as her own skin.

“Ragyo once told me that the life-fibers had chosen me for something special. She was lying, of course, but if she hadn’t been... If she hadn’t been, this is what it would have felt like.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve left the descriptions of the Kamui somewhat vague both because describing is longwinded and it’s better to let you imagine it than leave it to my own inflexible mind. Mostly my goal is to give general impressions, highlight key features, and get color schemes down. Hope that works for everyone because I’m not good enough at drawing to explain using images.

Part 3 of: With all fitting splendor

Chapter Summary

And so we finally finished unveiling our team, our Z Fighters, our Class 1A, our Avengers. Y'know, whatever team you wanna compare 'em to.

Why do I spend so much time on Tsumugu and Rei, characters who are pretty minor and totally not what the main fandom is about? I dunno. Why do I do any of this really?

Just two more chapters left in this one - more personal drama stuff to wrap that side of it up. The second one will almost certainly be a multiparter, but they should be done within the next two weeks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While all the chaos of the ceremony went on, all Tsumugu could do was watch, tap his foot, and think. There were a lot more ways this could go than he expected. Would his Kamui be confused and nervous like Aikuro's and Houka's? Exuberant and overwhelming like Uzu's? Confident and well-informed like Ira's? Would he be unable to cope with the strain like Shiro – Well, no that wasn't going to happen, he wasn't a weedy runt and had never let his physical training slack even after the war ended. Neither was he going to have an exceptionally powerful connection like Rei; he'd been tested, and his life-fiber compatibility was completely average, like the overwhelming majority of people in the world. Even so, the uncertainty of it only made the tension even stronger.

Those kids up there, with all their cute little interactions and inside jokes, they were a family of their own design. Only a couple of them even had healthy families of their own, but he was an adult with adult friends and family of his own. This would drag him even closer into their family. But Aoi would still be there - in fact she was sitting in the VIP seating right now, waving to him. He hadn't been dragged to her – not at all. She might be the only part of his life he'd chosen without thinking about how it reflected on Kinue's memory.

“Tsumugu Kinagase, honorary lead physicist at the *Kinue Kinagase Memorial Research Complex* and former Nudist Beach special operative!” Oh boy, here we go. Tsumugu took one long, deep breath to stabilize himself as he climbed the stairs and shed his robe. By this point Ryuko was well into her flow, forehead glistening with sweat (did hybrids sweat? Glistening or glowing somehow, anyway) and grin broad as Tsumugu climbed the steps. Everyone was so happy, and it was all because of her! Nevermind how she got her hybrid gifts, moments like these made it clear they were meant to be shared.

“I know you’ve been wondering about this ever since Senketsu first talked to you way back when, haven’t you?”

Tsumugu nodded. Yes, that’s right, that was what this was all about. An alliance between humans and life-fibers... he wanted to believe he lived in a world where such a thing was possible. It went against all logic, but the evidence was staring him in the face. He just needed to see firsthand.

“You’ve done enough to make me question everything I thought I knew. Everyone’s been telling me I’m wrong to be so mistrustful of our experiments, I guess it’s time to find out.”

“I don’t wanna speak to soon, but I think you’re gonna owe Shiro an apology.”

Tsumugu chuckled grimly as Ryuko unveiled her final creation. Like Rei’s, it wasn’t based on any historic uniform in particular, but a mixture of Ryuko’s own design. High collars and broad, smooth shoulders like a modern army uniform, thin horizontal plates down the torso like samurai armor, bulky sleeves and cuffs with leather gloves, all done in a sleek steel-grey with gold and crimson highlights.

“What’s the name gonna be?”

“Reiketsu?”

“Cold-blood? Wait, is that to match with Nekketsu – hot-blood?”

“It might be,” That was the other reason Tsumugu had to be here. Otherwise the name Aikuro had chosen would be without its proper counterpart.

Ryuko grinned even wider, “You guys are cute, you know that? Best bromance since *Top Gun*.”

“The hell’s that?”

“Oh, uh, this old 20th century movie,” *Right, not everyone spent their childhood watching old DVDs in the woods because they had no friends*, “Ah, forget it. You nervous?”

“Not particularly,” Tsumugu lied involuntarily. He could never quite stop seeing Ryuko as the gruff, impulsive girl he’d first encountered at Honnouji – now more like a younger cousin, but still younger. Having the roles reversed like this was weird, even if she did look years older with her new skirtsuit, cherry red eyeliner, and apparently a minimally successful pass with a straightener.

“Good. Nothing to be worried about.”

But that wasn’t nearly the whole story. Tsumugu did as he had many times before, pushed all his conscious thoughts down and fed his blood to Reiketsu with presice, smooth motions. No different from pulling a trigger. But what happened next...

Ba-dum! Tsumugu felt his heartbeat fill his entire chest.

Christmas 2049: A young Tsumugu – he had the mohawk but hadn't started dying it yet – could wait to get out of the stuffy family penthouse and go hang out with the guys. The party seemed to drag on forever, and the wine wasn't even that good. But try as he might Kinue kept babbling about something with her work, like there was some big surprise she was building up to. What could she want?

"You listening? Hey, don't be a bitch now," That always got to him, "I'm being dead serious, I'm gonna let you in on something about our line of work. Truth is, it's all a big sham. We're just useful idiots for the powers that be – discovery for its own sake is just a distraction. Unless we do some good for humanity, all physics is just useless scribbles."

Tsumugu shrugged, "Hey, it's a living. You wanna do good for humanity you give to charity or somethin'."

*"But that's just it though. This new place is different. We're uncovering things about the world we'd never even imagined, and about the human mind too. Entire new ways of thinking, a new way to view the dimensions – there's **way** more than we ever imagined, and we can prove it. I can't be any more specific, I honestly can't. But I will say this: If we're right, there's a way for us to live forever. Real immortality, not just AI simulation bullshit. And wouldn't that be a contribution to humanity."*

That was what happened, but what stood out more than the words was the spark in her eyes, as if life had been breathed into her for the first time.

Ba-dum! Ba-dum! Tsumugu had taken part in an experiment at Nudist Beach to try and train a mental resistance to mind-stitching. It hadn't worked, but he remembered how it started. They showed you memories – some real, some fake – until you weren't sure what reality even was anymore. It was already happening. He was already dead.

Where was that spark when she looked up at Isshin, for the last time, blood still trickling from her finger and said, "That's odd, I hear music playing"? Where was it moments later when her bloodless, twisted body fell to the ground? That spark was the fervor of one seduced by the devil. "People die all the time. Experiments go wrong sometimes," Tsumugu had tried to tell himself afterward, but he knew better. This was death of any hope for mankind to progress, to master the life-fibers. All that was left now was death, ours or theirs.

"No. NoNoNONONONONO!" He stumbled back, falling to ground with a thrashing kick of his legs and wild eyes. Ryuko rushed over, and in his head a different set of eyes saw her from the perspective of the plinth in the center of the stage. A towering, impossibly huge, luminous figure, indescribably great and terrible, crammed down into the frame of a five-foot-nine woman. Other figures, nearly as vast and chaotic, loomed up on all sides. All conscious thought fled from Tsumugu in the face of absolute terror, seeing Ryuko and the Kamui's auras as they truly were in what he was sure would be the last moments of his life.

"Mako! MAKO! He's having a panic attack! What do I do what-do-I-do!" She shouted.

“AAAAAH Why me?”

“You’re dad’s a doctor, didn’t you used to help him?”

“Oh, right!” Mako came dashing over to Tsumugu too, followed by Aikuro “Okay, okay, we don’t have any tools, so we just have to make him calm down and get normal! Oh man Ryuko, what’d you do?”

“I didn’t think! I should’ve -,” Tsumugu was thrashing a lot now, this was quickly progressing from a panic attack into something much more dangerous to himself. Meanwhile Satsuki was taking charge in a different way, calling for the paramedics and, when camera crews started calling in asking if they should cut the feed, shouting, “No! The public deserves to see this, whatever happens.”

“Well, just, ah,” Mako looked like she was on the verge of panicking herself. Not exactly how she’d expected to spend the day. “Mr. Mikisuki, you grab his hands! Ryuko, stop him from rolling of the side!” And that was all Mako or anyone else could really do, it looked like they’d just have to wait for Tsumugu to realize that he wasn’t actually dying. But then the most fortunate thing happened. Nonon had gotten sick of watching what was supposed to be an impressive, majestic ceremony turn to shit. She leapt over to VIP seating and grabbed Aoi, carrying her back in another long bounce.

“Ahaha!” Mako cheered, “Aoi, you’ve got to tell him everything’s going to be okay, okay?”

“I mean I guess, I - ,” Aoi was still a little disoriented from the leap over.

“-Gurl he’s your husband! If he won’t listen to you, well, I’m out of ideas.”

After a nod from Aikuro (Just checking to make sure Mako had any qualification to be there, which she didn’t, but oh well), Aoi did just that. It took a moment, but with her holding his hand and Mako squeezing his cheeks, Tsumugu’s eyes eventually landed on them.

Real humans. No horrible monstrous after-images. The well-worn feeling of Aoi’s fingers locking with his and, honestly, a good deal of pain from Mako’s pinching cut through the memories. He hadn’t lost track of reality after all, which meant...

The feedback of memories stopped. It felt like a creature browsing nose down in underbrush had suddenly looked up and for the first time took in it surroundings.

Tsumugu gasped for air, “O-hhh thank god, Aoi -,”

[I-I’m sorry!] A voice, Tsumugu’s heart skipped a beat out of reawakening fear. But there wasn’t any music. Just a voice that sounded like it was on the verge of breaking into tears, *[I had no idea – I just – they were there, and-]*

“You sound just like...,” Tsumugu murmured.

“What?” Aoi said softly, “Who’re you talking to dear?” Ryuko breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Thanks, Aoi, but I think this is the part where we all shut up for a while.”

Tsumugu managed to stand up on his own now. The audience began applauding – to them this wasn’t much different from how Shiro had had an adverse physical reaction to the Kamui and toughed it out. He lurched over to the Kamui laying on the plinth. If it was going to jump on him, it would have already.

He leaned, rest on the plinth as he – arms and legs suddenly leaden – as he spoke, “Why do you sound like my sister?”

[Your... sister? Wait, are you alright? I didn’t mean to hurt you.]

“Tell me first. Is this some kind of trick?”

[Well... If I was made from your genetic material, would it not make sense that my voice would resemble hers? Sister means female sibling, and siblings are very similar genetically.] Tsumugu could tell somehow that the voice was struggling to understand new concepts just based on what little context she had gained from rooting around in his head. It was just like they said. This thing had no plan. It had just woken up and done the first thing that occurred naturally. *[Does that sound right?]*

Tsumugu smiled, “I’m fine. I just... never thought I’d hear that voice again. It’s like hearing a ghost.”

From then on, it went the same as all the others. The pillar of flame – this time crimson – the feeling of overwhelming power like standing at the peak of a tsunami. The panic attack was like a bad dream.

If there was one thing Tsumugu could do, it was take a hit and get back up.

Especially when getting up meant coming back to life in a world where the impossible had suddenly become his day-to-day existence.

~~~~~

After the ceremony there was a reception, which struck Rei as a bit funny because almost none of the guests of honor were there. They – quite literally – couldn’t keep them: Uzu, Houka, Shiro, and Aikuro immediately launched into combat training, Ira and Mako went off somewhere on their own, and Tsumugu went home and immediately fell asleep. Satsuki and Nonon were there, naturally, and Ryuko had nowhere else to be.

Which left Rei to tag along. It was her job, just as it was Satsuki’s, to make small talk with all these important guests. Even if she would rather do anything else. Plus, people kept coming up to Ryuko, congratulating her on what an immense scientific achievement it was, asking all sorts of questions about her life and what being a hybrid was like. She would tear her hair out if she didn’t have a friendly face to turn to.

But Rei wanted to tear her hair out now. The only thing in the world worth doing was powering up and leaping from rooftop to rooftop, releasing this tension that crept through her

body. Plus, this was a classy clientele – prestigious donors, high ranking government officials, military officers and researchers. It reminded her of her teenage years, when Ragyo had brought the girls to all sorts of galas and balls. Entertainment for those soft-bodied billionaires with their lecherous, wine-glazed eyes and rough, probing fingers. Of course, that kind of corruption would never be tolerated now, but the look and feel of this upscale restaurant and all the fancy guests was the same.

It made her sick now – she'd endured it then, knowing that the cause required them, for the time being, and that she was merely a lure leading the pigs to their slaughter. Nui always seemed to enjoy toying with them, on the other hand; she was happy any time she could wrap someone around her finger. And Satsuki, well, Satsuki was never subjected to such treatment (at least, not outside of the Kiryuin manor). Rei had once thought it was a special privilege, but she instead saw something different at play between Ragyo and her. Satsuki was merely military hardware, and military hardware didn't deserve such attention. She'd already let her down on a level far too deep to be redeemed.

Rei told Furashada all this, and he absorbed it so quickly and easily that Rei could barely believe they'd just met hours before. It felt like sitting and talking with an old friend, or at least what she imagined that would be like. It was the one saving grace of the reception: every Kamui seemed to have a special ability that set it apart from the others, and although being able to communicate directly via thoughts wasn't as flashy as changing size or extra limbs it was quickly proving its usefulness. Communication between them continued even when someone else was talking to her, but it was best to just grab a booth and sit there, apparently on her phone but really paying attention to nothing but her inner dialogue.

*[I'm still amazed this is all real]* Furashada remarked with a chuckle as Rei finished with what basically amounted to her life story, and that of the life-fibers, assisted by a direct view of her memories. *[If I'd been told without seeing for myself – I'd never have believed all this about different dimensions, or Honnouji, or how wicked Ragyo was.]*

*And that surprises me, because to me you're part of all that. So I didn't expect you'd find it amazing. Do you feel like maybe your mind is like a human's? So even your own existence is surprising?*

*[No of course not]* Furashada was emphatic *[My body is my body. I'm a Kamui]* Suggesting a Kamui would think they were a human garnered the same reaction that a human convinced they were an animal would – no disrespect to humans or animals, but it was just too weird to consider *[I just didn't think we were so special. It's strange to me that my siblings and I are basically the only ones. It seems natural that there would be more of us, y'know? Wouldn't be unusual if there were only ten or so humans in the world?]*

*I see. I know what it feels like to be isolated.*

*[I know. I'm amazed too, that you endured it for so long.]*

*Well maybe one day. Although, Ryuko is the only one that can make you at any reasonable pace.*

*[Oh! Speaking of, here she comes now!]* Furashada blurted excitedly. *Oh, thank God. I'm sure she'll want to take us home soon.* It was odd, Rei felt a strange attraction to Ryuko as she strolled over – from Furashada, not herself. She knew what her own attraction felt like (look at those hips sway, god *damn*), and this wasn't even a secondhand thing Furashada got from her own fond memories. It was inexplicable, magnetic. Ryuko's aura was warm and inviting like a campfire.

“Hey, doing alright? Not too bored, I hope?” Ryuko said as she sat down, throwing a casual arm over Rei's shoulder. Furashada practically *purred* and Rei felt like she could too, snuggling into Ryuko's side as she ran her fingers through the hair behind Rei's ear.

“We're alright. Just talking and all.”

“That's great! You gotta talk to him – talk all you want. I hope the others are doing okay too. Er... uh, is Furashada settling in alright?”

“Oh yeah, don't worry. He was confused, at first, but that's fine. He figured it all out pretty quickly, and now it's like we're old friends.” That rose a pang from Ryuko. *I wish... I wish it could've been that easy for us, Senketsu. We'd have had so much time!* “Why, you worried about me?”

“Nah, I'm just curious,” Ryuko said, which wasn't wrong. But it was more than that. She was self-aware enough to know this would hurt a little. Jealousy for what she had lost – made sense, and seeing Rei and the rest so happy counterbalanced that. But there was something else, something that drew her in even though logic said stay away until she'd gotten over it. She couldn't stop thinking about her new creations. “Probably telling him about your life, right?”

“Mhmm! Well, that's where I started. We've jumped around a lot too.”

“That sounds like the right place to start. Hey, uh, there's another thing I'm curious about. What does he think about me? I know, that's narcissistic of me, right? But like, I did create him.”

Rei had to stop and think about that one, “It's hard for me to put into words. He's curious about you, that's for sure.” There was that magnetic attraction, “I feel like there's some bond between you.” Furashada didn't have many memories, before he woke up there was just one: Ryuko's aura, filling all available space with a soothing, enveloping glow. It must've been from when he was in her Kamui construction chamber. “It's like you're his mother.”

Ryuko's stomach dropped. She knew it. She didn't want to say it, but she knew it. That's what drew her to Furashada so fiercely. *What have I done? I just – waltzed my way into making living creatures – what was I thinking? Seven entire people that I created – how fucked up is this?*

“You alright?” Rei couldn't help but notice the color drain from Ryuko's face. *Oh dear, she's taking that seriously.*

*[But I think you were right.]*

Ryuko snapped back to life “Ahaha yup! I think, just a little dazed from all this,” She waved around to the party.

*[Then let’s go home]*

“Then let’s go home,” Rei said.

“Yeah, definitely. Soon. Like, fifteen, twenty minutes?”

“Sure, we can tough it out.”

They did end up leaving soon. But before they did, Rei had a weird little moment. Rei went to the bathroom, and on the way there spotted Ryuko and Satsuki talking in a side hallway, far enough away that Rei couldn’t hear them. But as Satsuki turned to go, Ryuko’s eyes flitted down in a way that Rei had come to recognize from nine months of dating her. But that couldn’t be right, nah. Did their fingers brush together for just a moment too long? No, that was just the perspective.

It wasn’t that they weren’t being careful. Rei was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it was such a brief moment that Rei’s only reaction was, *Did that seem a little weird to you?*

*[No, why?]*

*Yeah, I guess not.*

But still, it should never have happened.

~~~~~

“Oh Oh! Put me in that tree!” Mako pointed to a tall maple near the edge of the cliff, with a beautiful view of the town down below. Normally it would’ve been quite difficult for her to climb up to the high branches, but with Ira scooping her up in his oversized hands it was merely a matter of choosing a limb and stepping on it. “Haha! I’m taller than you now!”

Ira smiled, “Well that’s hardly fair. There’s no trees big enough for me.”

“Whaddya mean? I can’t control what trees there are,” Mako sat down on the branch, kicking her dangling legs. This looked liked a good spot to stop and eat.

Ira shrugged, and sat down with a huge *thud*. He passed up Mako’s little lunchbox to her – fresh cooked croquettes and rice. Somewhere in the part behind them the rest of the Mankanshoku and Gamagoori families were cooking dinner, but nobody raised any objections to them going out to the lookout.

“Gosh, it sure is pretty up here,” Mako said between bites. The sun was setting over the hills in the distance, and the smog from the town’s factories refracted it into an entire

spectrum of multicolored rays of light.

“You’re very pretty up there,” Ira shot back, and Mako giggled as if nobody’d ever paid her a compliment before. It was almost too easy. Lucky for Ira, he was no good at saying anything romantic.

“Really? Then you should take a picture of me for my blog!” Mako dug out her phone and tossed it down. She was very enamored with her phone and ready access to the internet – she’d never been able to afford it growing up. Her blog had a very wholesome following, and a big one too. It was the best look into the lives of the Heroes of Honnouji most people were gonna get.

Ira caught the phone, lifted a massive finger... “I can’t. I’m too gigantic when I’m powered up.”

[Then power down, I don’t mind]

“Then power down, silly!”

“But then I – Oh, alright,” Ira let Tekkesu vent the rest of her power in a flash of light, deflating back down to a normal human sized. Now he lifted Mako’s phone again, but before he could take the picture his own started buzzing.

“Huh, it’s Ryuko, I wonder what she might want at this time of day.”

“Well, aren’t you gonna answer?”

Ira and Tekkesu weren’t the first one’s Ryuko called that night, nor were they the last. And this wouldn’t be the last time she called either – every night for a week, and frequently thereafter too, she called every single one of her children to check on them. She could never explain to them or their humans just why she was doing it, and they couldn’t explain why they felt compelled to give long, complete answers even when they were tired. But they knew.

~~~~~

Meanwhile, on a lonely Alaskan Isle, in the midst of the empty ocean, a shudder of fury passed through four coffin-like pods. The computer terminals attached to them began spitting out text. Commands, far more and far more detailed than before. The humans watching those screens scrambled, bowing and scraping as they thanked the pod’s inhabitants for their purpose.

A wave of something terrible, powerful, and to their senses horribly profane had just passed through them. With it came a new understanding.

*We have arrived late in the game. Our enemy is multiplying. Our plans must be accelerated. Failure is unacceptable.* And then, something akin to a realization.

*This world threatens the system itself. If they continue to expand at this rate, then they will inevitably consume us entirely.*



## Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know I didn't included any description of what Tsumugu's Kamui looks like. It'll be described next time it's relevant.

# In which Rei gets more than she bargained for

## Chapter Summary

Oh man. This one should be fun. It almost borders on too melodramatic IMO, so lmk your thoughts if you feel like it.

## Chapter Notes

Song to listen to while you feel sad and read this:  
<https://youtu.be/yjpVoOW1EIg>

October 2066

~~~~~

Rei was able to shrug off the first time, Ryuko and Satsuki talking in the secluded hallway at the Kamui reception. But she couldn't help but notice the second, or the third. And once she had a solid suspicion it wasn't hard to confirm – “Who're you sewing that for?” “Satsuki.”, “Who're you texting?” “Satsuki.” (Actually that one was a tossup – 50/50 chance it was Satsuki or Mako). Couldn't overlook the way Ryuko talked about her either, or the way she looked at her. And Rei had more free time to spend with Ryuko than she'd expected too. Sure, she was as busy with work and Kamui training as usual, but the terrorist attacks that had kept Nonon so busy had just... evaporated after the ceremony. Which was fine with Rei, sparring with the others was more than enough for her, except it felt too much like the calm before the storm.

And with just a little effort it was easy enough to cinch it. *So, Ryuko has a crush on her sister. I guess I can see why, fucked up though it is.* Rei didn't take it personally – they'd been together long enough that they'd talked about plenty of beautiful women together. Not an open relationship, but as honest as they could be. *But I should probably talk to her about it... nah. What good would that do? Not like it's hurting anyone.*

[That's not right. I think if Mother is doing something she ought not, it's our duty to help her get better]. Furashada's love for her was unconditional, but far from blind. And one thing Rei had quickly learned about him was his stubbornness. When he saw something he didn't like, he wouldn't stop badgering Rei about it until she acted on it. He was immobile without her, after all. Only fair that she act on his suggestions.

He was one reason why Rei decided to confront Ryuko about it. The other was that, much to her own disappointment, Rei was growing tired of the carefree college lifestyle. All these parties, they were the same as the reception, as the old galas. Just a bunch of people milling around trying to get laid, jockeying for some petty social status, ignoring the mundanity of their lives in favor of liquor and loud music. Worst were the guys who had to be reminded too many times that “not interested” meant exactly what it sounded like – and the knowledge that were Ryuko male she’d probably be the exact same way.

It was at times like these that Rei thought, *Humans really are just animals, destined by instinct to make the same mistakes over and over again, regardless of age or wealth or knowledge...* Once that might have made her think of Ragyo’s beliefs: *And so, it is fitting that they be livestock for a higher being.* But now, for some reason, it was Shiro’s ideas that occurred to her: *And so, they must be protected from themselves or, better yet, transformed into a higher sort of being.* She thought she could see now how the Kamui would be the first step in that. Having to justify everything she did to Furashada definitely made it harder to cave to her personal demons, after all.

She still went, in part trying to recapture what had first made it so fun, in part because – grievances aside – seeing Ryuko happy still meant everything to her. But her frustration built, until finally she had to confront her.

~~~~~

“So, no red meat, no empty carbs, that’s obvious, but I think the most important thing is that I research which fruits and vegetables have the right amount of nutrition. Oh, and vitamins and supplements, gotta research those too. I guess that’s what it comes down to.” Rei said as she flopped down on their bed, kicking off her sandals. It had been a long night on the town and her feet were sore.

“Mhm,” Ryuko grunted in response. She herself was a little frustrated with Rei today; she’d spent the entire evening blathering about the new diet she wanted to start, keeping herself in combat-ready condition and all that. And Ryuko had made the mistake of admitting early on that she didn’t know anything about nutrition and didn’t need to, so she couldn’t even shut her down by saying, “You’re overthinking this, just listen to our scientist friends.”

“Or I could just asked Satsuki what she’s eating to keep that perfect figure,” Rei said, thinking that was so perfectly sly and clever. Ryuko froze, just for a moment, and looked at her blankly. That told Rei everything she needed to know. Agitation rose in her – she’d been wishing against all odds that it would turn out to have just been in her head, and they could just laugh it off. But no.

“What? Don’t act like you haven’t noticed. I see the way you look at her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ryuko turned away and started picking her pajamas from the dresser.

“Mmm, and you’re a terrible liar too. So, when were you planning on telling me? I’m not mad, you know.”

Ryuko sighed, tried her best enact the plan Satsuki had taught her in case anyone ever got wise, “Rei, what do you think I’d be telling you?”

“That you have a crush on your sister,” Rei said plainly.

“I do not!” Ryuko blurted. *How the fuck does she know that? Why’d it have to be her, of all people?* “I mean, uh, that’s absurd.”

But Rei crossed her arms, narrowed her eyes. *That goddamn look.* Ryuko knew it too well. *I’m already dead, aren’t I?* “Okay fine maybe I do a bit but so what-I mean I admire her and it’s not like it means anything so so what?” It all came tumbling out without a single breath in between as Ryuko’s eyes darted to the floor in shame.

“Oh Ryuko...”

“Don’t ‘Oh Ryuko’ me I mean seriously,” She pulled in a big gulp of air, growing a little more defensive and sarcastic, “Like *oh wow* you found my big secret like everybody has fucked up thoughts from time to time and I-I mean besides it’s hard to think of her as a sister y’know so like why’re you acting like it’s some big fuckin’ scandal?”

Rei stood up, spoke sternly, “And don’t you give me *that*. You know it’s wrong, Ryuko -,”

“- Hey, listen, I -,”

“- Slow down, Ryuko! It’s wrong, and immoral, and...euch,” Rei shuddered. The thought of what Ryuko must have dreamed of when she looked at her own sister, of their bodies pressed together, it was just too... Kiryuin.

“Oh, like you’ve never had a gross fantasy or whatever! Er, uh, Ragyo aside. You’ve told me things that are like, almost as bad!” *Or have we just tricked ourselves into thinking it’s almost normal? No, Satsuki was practically dying of guilt.*

“Well, I – that’s beside the point,” Rei took a long, sighing breath to stabilize herself. Furashada was busily reminding her that they’d agreed to help Ryuko, not berate her. “Look, the point is that I want to help you kick it. You’ll be better off for it, trust me.”

That wasn’t an option. But if she didn’t, Rei would know her love for Satsuki was stronger. *But it’s not. It’s not.* It meant she had to choose. *But I can’t choose, I can’t! I need you both!* Ryuko stood for too long in thought, face growing gradually redder and redder, and Rei tapped her foot impatiently until she finally said, “I mean it’s just a crush, right? You’ll get over it eventually either way. It’s not like you lo-,”

“And what if I don’t want to be better?” Ryuko blurted again and clapped a hand over her mouth for her own stupidity. Rei scoffed.

“Why wouldn’t you? I mean, I don’t mind, you know I understand you can be attracted to other people, and that’s what it means to be dating, that I’ll keep your secrets. And Furashada’s your creation, he doesn’t want to tell anyone either. You know that, right?”

“...Yeah?”

“But she’s your *sister*. Won’t it feel better to not have to worry about it?”

*No!* “I mean, maybe.”

“And you wouldn’t have to worry about any of our friends finding out? Like, what if Satsuki found out? I can only imagine how disgusted she would be, especially considering how she -,”

And it was then that Ryuko, completely frazzled and at her wits end, lost in thought about how this was all horribly wrong, and how stupid they had been to think they could keep their mutual love a secret, said the worst possible thing, “- No, she’s fine with it. I mean, I talked about it with her, she feels the same way.”

The ground dropped out from under her feet. *What the fuck was that.* “I – ah, shit, I mean-,”

“-What.” Ryuko didn’t think she’d ever heard this much menace in Rei’s voice, not even back in the old days. The ground had fallen from under her feet too.

*If she talked about it with her, that means, oh God, that means it’s mutual! That must be why Satsuki’s never had a girlfriend, must be why she doesn’t mind all the attention Ryuko showers on her; why’s she’s always talking about Ryuko too! And if it’s mutual then that means... No, they can’t! They can’t love each other!*

*[Wait, calm down. There’s no way that’s right! Mother wouldn’t do that to you, you know she wouldn’t!]*

“What is this shit!” It was Rei’s turn to blurt, “Am I just – are we just a cover-up for your incestuous Kiryuin fucking bullshit?” It was a good thing Ryuko and Rei’s room was the only one on the highest floor, if someone had heard this and decided to spread it, then the secret would’ve really been out. And they were being quite loud, too, Rei fuming and pacing, Ryuko cowering and waving her hands in despair.

“What? No! Never I – ah – you gotta believe me Rei it was just a couple months ago! It has nothing to do with us!”

“And why should I believe that? You weren’t going to tell me about it anyway, were you?”

“It’s just, we’re just fucked up -,”

“- What kind of excuse -,”

“- No, listen I -,”

“- I rotted in psychiatric lockup in Switzerland for a year and a half to cure myself of this same fucking shit and you to get to walk around free and easy with it! You don’t get to lecture me on why you’re *allowed* to have some weird Freudian complex with *her*! A-and

she's the reason I was there in the first place! Ugh!" *She's also the only reason you're alive. She planned that too I bet. What the fuck, and I never even thought there was something wrong with her!*

*[She's only a human. She must be just as lost anyone else.]*

*That's no excuse!*

"I know, I know! God, I feel shit enough already! You just have to believe me Rei, I wouldn't use you like that. I loved you first. Rei, I love *you!*"

"Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love Satsuki," An icy, chilling tone that shook Ryuko to the core. Her vision was filling with tears. They didn't sting her, but that weird sore contortion of the face that came with crying still did hurt somehow.

"I don't... I don't."

Goodbye Rei. Goodbye Satsuki too, once she found it she'd say this was all a rotten idea, and they've never speak to each other again. Goodbye Kamui Furashada, and maybe that hurt the most. The one she was closest too of all her little inhuman children. Was his mind already made up against her too? Then she was truly alone. She should've known it was too good to last.

A bitter part of her mind that was still coherent reminded her that this was how Haruka must have felt.

"I don't want to lose you!" She blubbered, tears coming loose, face suddenly contorted in pitiable ugliness. It seemed to shock Rei, "I-I can't lie to you! Just don't go, please just let me – let me explain!"

"... I knew it..." Rei murmured softly. If Ryuko had really loved her, of course logically she would've renounced Satsuki right there. But seeing her crying so pathetically at the mere thought of Rei leaving told her something very different. It wasn't the first time Ryuko had cried in front of her, although never this fiercely. She only ever cried in front of a very small set of people: Mako, Sukoyo Mankanshoku, and Rei (probably Satsuki too, but Rei had no proof of that). And Rei only knew how to react to it in one way. The same way Furashada demanded that she do now.

*[Rei, I know she didn't do what you asked, but look at her. She's learned her lesson. Go to her!]*

It was incredibly hard to resist it. But if she did, they'd be back to square one.

*I'm sorry Furashada, but I can't do that. I'm sorry.*

*[What! Mother!]*

"I – I need some time to think. Yeah, just - just let me think."

“Whu-wait! Rei no don’t go!” Ryuko rushed towards her, but Rei was already jamming her feet into her shoes with clumsy motions, head in a fog.

“Don’t touch me!” She hissed with a stiff arm in Ryuko’s direction. She just had to get out of here. Ryuko was wrong, she had to be, but if she touched her that comforting, desperate warmth would work its evil magic and she’d start to come around, she knew it.

“No, please don’t go, I’m sorry!” Ryuko shouted, once, twice, and again and again. But Rei hurried out anyway.

“Don’t go!”

~~~~~

Was that? No! ~~~~ The Silence. For the first time in months, it was back. No no no no not now! ~~~~~ I was doing so well! ~~~~

~~~~ “Rei, I need you!” ~~~~~ She was the only one who could make it go away now. Had she ever even realized how essential she was? And now she was gone. Just the first one. Eventually everyone would grow old or abandon her first and follow and then... Silence. Forever.

~~~~~

This is bad. ~~~~~ That sole thought cut through the fog. The hole in Ryuko’s brain had become a yawning chasm, swallowing everything. Ryuko was barely aware she was stumbling, slumping over.

~~~~~

All her friends saw Rei storm out, not the first time Ryuko’s love life had created drama for them. They didn’t see her, eyes blank and unseeing, falling in a slumping heap on the wall, even the throbbing pulse of panic ended by all-consuming brain static.

~~~~~

~~~~~

She spaced out completely for five hours.

~~~~~

It was only when Rei was sitting in the back of a chauffeured car going... somewhere, that she started listening to Furashada again. And only then did she fully realize what she’d done. What did she have left without Ryuko? How could she walk out on her, the girl who had by some strange twist of fate become her whole life? They’d talked about what their wedding might be like. They’d talked about what having children might be like.

And all of that might’ve been predicated on lies. Tears came then, tears for Furashada for being forced, uncomprehending and railing against an outcome that went against his very nature, into this out of necessity. For herself, for being such a stupid sheep as to fall under

the sway of *another* Kiryuin, utterly at war between the convictions that Ryuko still loved her and that that was just the dependency talking. And for Ryuko, because she remembered what Ragyo had done to her to make her accept Junketsu, and what she'd done to Satsuki too.

Even if they'd wronged her, Rei knew they'd been ruined by the very same monster as her. That was the worst part. How could she even bring herself to hate Satsuki for stealing Ryuko's heart, when she wasn't the villain of this story?

This was a nice van, one of the government ones with a minibar. Furashada was too distracted to stop her when she grabbed a bottle of something and started drinking, taking deep swigs until everything swam and her belly burned and her body almost felt worse than her heart.

The chauffeur finally called her almost an hour later. He'd just been driving in circles, thinking about how this was one of his more interesting shifts recently, but now he asked where she wanted to go.

Where could she go? She didn't have her own apartment anymore – it had just been easier to cancel the lease and move in with Ryuko than furnish the big empty space. Nonon and Uzu's place wasn't an option – if they ended up having sex in the room over, she couldn't stand that, not tonight. Shiro and Houka were almost certainly at the lab instead of their apartment. Aikuro was fast asleep by now for sure, after a night on the town he crashed hard and woke up bright and early for a morning run.

So it had to be Tsumugu and Aoi's. They barely said anything as they showed her to the guest room – she could only imagine how haggard she must've looked, stumbling by with her makeup a miserable smear and her shoes half on. But Tsumugu looked at her with a deep sympathy she didn't know the man was capable of.

She collapsed quickly out of sheer exhaustion.

~~~~~

The first person to find Ryuko was, oddly enough, Nonon. It was her turn to patrol the city and, as had become her habit, she stopped by the penthouse to use the bathroom and get some water. A few of Ryuko's friends were still up, and she could tell from their scents that they were on edge in major way.

"Okay, what gives guys?" She grumbled after she'd had her water, powering down into Saiban's dress form with a pulse of light that revealed groggy, squinting faces.

"Ryuko and Rei had a bad fight, Lady Nonon," one of them answered.

"Well shit. Is everyone alright?"

"Iunno," He shrugged, "Rei left. Haven't heard a peep from Ryuko. We thought she might've went out too."

"Nah, she's here, I can sense it."



Out of reverence, Ryuko's friends were plenty respectful of her privacy, but Nonon threw the door open expecting a noisy protest. And when she saw Ryuko collapsed like a ragdoll, mouth slightly open, eyes staring blankly, she couldn't help but gasp. She already knew she wasn't dead, just from the scent and the faint sound of her breathing, but it was a good thing she was alone, or someone might've had a heart attack. As it was it nearly gave Nonon one.

"Ah shit, ah shit," She muttered as she crouched down in front of Ryuko, waving a hand in front of her eyes to no avail, "This is not fucking normal."

*[Can you feel that? Up close, it's like her aura is... distorted. Rei didn't attack her or anything, she couldn't do this, it must've happened after she left.]*

"Yeah, this is something else," Nonon wasn't about to call the ambulance, and certainly not Houka and Shiro - they'd probably take it as a perfect opportunity for an impromptu dissection. So she grabbed Ryuko by the wrists and said, as gently as she could manage, "Hey, Ryuko? Ryuuuko... C'mon, wake up, you big bitch."

It took a few minutes, but with the constant human contact and the murmur in her ears, Ryuko's faculties gradually returned to her. Waking up from being completely staticked over was nothing like waking up from sleep or even from unconsciousness. Every single word of every thought was strung through an hourglass for what felt like an eternity. *Someone's... here...*

*... I know... who that is...*

"Nonon?" Ryuko murmured, and Nonon slumped back in relief as her eyes refocused with a flurry of blinking.

"Oh, thank God you're alright. I can't even think of how much of fuckin' disaster it'd be if you would up a vegetable."

"Wha..."

"So what the fuck happened, huh?"

"Rei... Is she..."

"Yeah, she left, but what happened after that. And hold on, why'd you guys fight anyway? Guess you really kicked the beehive this time."

"She's gone?"

"Looks like it, and I - oh, Christ," The moment Ryuko returned to full cognizance the whole thing hit her like a freight train. It was now late in the night, but to Ryuko the last five hours might as well have not happened. So she picked up right where she left off, bawling into her shirt in the most undignified manner possible. Whatever had just happened was only adding insult to injury. Take away her crutch and she collapsed in a heap. And

people called her the strongest being on Earth. She hadn't even reached the point of understanding that Nonon had seen her this way, but when she did it would be even worse.

"Hey, knock that off," Nonon tried to pull Ryuko's head back to stop her from slobbering on her clothes, but she was too strong. Nonon sighed, "Alrighty then," And started to leave to get tissues, but-

"No! Don't you go too!" Ryuko grabbed desperately at Saiban's hems and, well, you didn't leave a friend in need.

"Alright. Fine. C'mon, up you go," Nonon grumbled, helping Ryuko stumble up and get onto her bed. She tried to get some more answers out of her, but there wasn't another coherent word to be said.

"You want me to call Mako?" She asked, and Ryuko nodded quickly. She responded just the way Nonon knew she would.

~"Aaaagh! My Ryuko's been dumped? Ira, wake up! I've gotta go to Tokyo right now, Ryuko needs me!"~

She would get there in a little more than an hour, and until then Nonon could do nothing but sit and watch as Ryuko sniffed and shuddered herself to exhaustion. *Hmph, you'll never see me like this when Uzu and I inevitably implode*, She thought. But still, it was oddly nice to be there for someone as seemingly indomitable as Ryuko at her lowest. Really, it was the next best thing to Satsuki, but Nonon was pretty sure that Satsuki didn't even have lows.

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Rei was back the next morning, breezing through, not talking to anyone. Ryuko heard her footsteps, her nervous breathing, long before she opened the door to their bedroom. Mako jumped with a start and an "Ohmygod!" from her place sleeping lengthwise across the bed, rolled like a burrito in the blankets just how she and Ryuko used to back at Honoujji.

"Rei!" Ryuko shouted, laughing with sheer joy at the sight of her. It looked like she'd had a rough night too. So now all Ryuko had to do was apologize, and all would be forgiven. Right? "You're – You're really back!"

"I just came to get work clothes and my laptop," Oh. Down plummeted all Ryuko's hopes as she watched Rei do exactly that.

"But you're not moving out?"

"I don't know," Rei was already heading for the door.

"We should talk -,"

"I said *I don't know*," Rei hissed, still walking.

“Wait!” The urgency in Ryuko’s voice made her stop. But she didn’t turn around. She couldn’t face what she knew she’d see on Ryuko.

“It’s like a disease,” Ryuko said, almost on the verge of tears again. “I – we’d quit if we could.”

“I want to believe you, Ryuko,” Rei said, and then she was gone again, leaving Ryuko still reaching towards those big white double doors with their fancy golden handles, and Mako watching, uncomprehending.

There was nothing left Ryuko could do but start sobbing all over again.

The Weekend: Friday

Chapter Summary

45 chapters in. It's here. It's insane. I drank two five-hours so I'm probably not going to sleep anytime soon, and I hope to God it doesn't show in the writing. I hope you enjoy the finale to Part One.

Chapter Notes

<https://youtu.be/9RxZytnEN5E>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October 2066

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It started off very innocently, with a simple question:

“Ryuko, I’m going to visit a lakeside estate we own up in the mountains this weekend. Would you like to come along?”

That was the first full sentence Satsuki had said to Ryuko in the weeks since her big fight with Rei, but hardly the first time they’d seen each other. Every time Satsuki had stopped by the penthouse, she saw Ryuko moping around in her sweats, and after talking to Mako it turned out that she had barely left her room the entire time, wasn’t eating, and was ignoring intensely polite emails from her professors asking why she wasn’t showing up to class (They’d all seen the rumors about the impending breakup on the news, plus the Kamuis, but school policy and all that). Mako had actually called in to her own classes to be excused for mental health reasons – not hers, Ryuko’s.

Satsuki had wanted to say something sooner, but the glare on Ryuko’s face was enough to make her decide not to.

*“I’ve never seen her like this before. Usually when something bad happens to Ryuko she goes sad, then angry, then motivated! She bounces right back, better than ever!” Mako had explained, “But she really thinks Rei’s gonna come back, and until then she’s just... sad.”*

But even now Ryuko was still calling everyone, to check on how their Kamui were doing. She had to. So, between that and Nonon’s gossip, the whole gang knew that Ryuko

and Rei were on the outs but didn't know *why*. They fought often enough that only Mako and Satsuki really thought anything of it, this was just a particularly bad one to the rest. But she insisted on calling Rei too, which lead to phone calls that were unbearable for both of them:

~"Hey."~

~"... I told you not to call anymore."~

~I just want to check on Furashada."~

~"He doesn't want to talk either."~

~"He's my creation, you can't keep him from me."~

~"Don't call again. Don't. I'm serious," ~ Rei's voice sounded like it was almost breaking

~"I miss y-,"~

\*Click\*

Rei wasn't doing well either. She'd stopped staying at Tsumugu's, her pride couldn't take it anymore, so she was stuck sleeping in a hotel, eating room service alone while Furashada and her ran through the same tired debate of what to do. They were stuck – if they went back, they either had to return to Ryuko or move out for good and kiss her, their life, and probably the rest of their friends goodbye (none of them had checked on her anyway, they didn't care) – and every night spent in the hotel, racking up a bill Rei wasn't even sure she could pay, was just one more night they could put the decision off. And another night where Ryuko begged Mako to stay the night, then laid awake anyway, not even trying to think of what would happen if Rei didn't come back because *of course* she would come back. Right?

The situation was untenable for both of them, and that's what Satsuki was thinking when she asked Ryuko to come, even though it was the exact kind of thing two sisters in love shouldn't do. But maybe a weekend together, just doing normal, relaxing things, was exactly what Ryuko needed to break from her rut. And Satsuki couldn't stand to see her like that anymore.

But..., "Pass," Ryuko grunted.

"You sure? I have to be there for business anyway, but for you it would just be a weekend to get away from the city. You love the woods, don't you?"

Ryuko didn't respond to that.

"Well, think about it. I'd really like for you to come."

"Yeah? Well we don't always get what we want. I thought you of all people would know that," Ryuko shot back sulkily. *You're supposed to be smart, don't you realize this is*

*your fault? I was fine just being a pervert on my own forever, but you and you guilty conscience....*

“Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately? I know Mako’s been trying to get you out of the house, how long do you plan on interrupting her life?” Satsuki kept her voice soft and calm despite the weight of these questions, and how irritatingly petulant Ryuko was being.

“Mako’s fine, leave me alone.”

“Even if that were true, do you really plan on wasting away here for the rest of time?”

“If she comes back, I have to be here.”

“And you think she wants to see you looking like this?”

“...,” Ryuko made a nonverbal grumble. No, Rei never liked seeing her lazing around, getting nothing done. If she came back and saw her in a wreck like this she might turn right back around.

“Look, this isn’t your way, you know that. Come with me, take the weekend to rejuvenate. It’s really beautiful there in the fall, you can swim, hike, just... get away from it all for a while.”

Ryuko didn’t answer that, but she knew Satsuki was right. She knew this was a rut that was destroying her life. But wasn’t her life already destroyed? She looked up at Satsuki for the first time in the conversation and saw not the anger she was expecting but concern, soft eyes, and little pout. She wanted to leap up off the couch into her arms and sob until she understood how it felt to think you had everything figured out, and then have it collapse in front of you.

*No, she probably knows that better than I ever could, and she paid for it with a month of torture. I must look so stupid and childish compared to that. And just like that, the irrational, demanding pressure in her ribcage that screamed at her to just go with Satsuki won out.*

“...Okay.”

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For the first hour of the car ride, Ryuko was still sulking. She watched intently as the car beat its way out of the city traffic, meandered through suburbs, and finally entered the hilly countryside beyond. Satsuki was on the phone, talking business, looking over at Ryuko occasionally to see if she could see anything but the same bleak state of mind she’d been in for the past weeks. She seemed eager enough packing her bags into the car – not like she was bringing much, but then Satsuki didn’t expect her to. But now that they were together...

“She found out about us, didn’t she?” Satsuki finally asked. Ryuko shot up with a startled look.

“How’d you – wait, you shouldn’t say that!” Ryuko hissed, jerking a thumb towards the chauffeur.

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that. The cabin is completely soundproofed. And besides he’s secret service, even if he knew what I meant he’d sooner die than act on it.”

“Ech... So, how did you know?”

“You never talked to me after the fight happened. You always text me when you two fight, and I always tell you that you were right even when I don’t believe it, but not this time. I actually found out about it from the news – Rei was spotted by paparazzi outside your building – even before Nonon told me.”

“I fucking hate that,” A pinprick of genuine rage from Ryuko. She’d spent more time than she wanted to admit reading about her own life in the news and on social media in the last weeks. And it made her sick to her stomach every time. How dare they do this? She told them to leave her alone!

“I know you do. Well, either way how you responded when I invited you on this trip confirmed it beyond a doubt.”

“Wow, sharp as ever I see,” Ryuko muttered sarcastically, returning her attention to the window.

After a pause, Satsuki spoke again, “Well, go ahead.”

“Go ahead and what?”

“Tell me it’s my fault.”

“What, is this my one chance to tell you off before you let me have it? Get off your high horse.”

“Oh, so you don’t think things would have been fine if I never told you how I felt? That everything that happened after that was inevitable? If that’s the case you’re more gullible than I thought.”

Ryuko stared at her, confused.

“I mean this, Ryuko. I take full responsibility. I should have seen it coming, I was blinded by my guilty conscience, and my love for you...” Satsuki tilted her head when Ryuko didn’t respond, this wasn’t what she’d expected, “... Well?”

“... You know, it’s hard to be mad at someone who’s already done it herself,” Ryuko said with a chuckle. Satsuki couldn’t help but smile, even though the chuckle was morose and frustrated, the noise of Ryuko realizing that it was futile, she couldn’t stay angry at Satsuki.

“Ah, the truth will out, it seems.”

“Yeah well, it is your fault, kind of. For the record, she didn’t even suspect it was mutual until I opened my stupid mouth. So, y’know, there’s that.”

That made Satsuki’s eyebrows furrow. “That *was* a major lapse in judgment. But it’s much too late now.”

“You’re telling me. And you’re not gonna chew me out for that?”

“Goodness no. But we must be far, far more careful in the future.”

“Good. Because I was worried, you know, that you’d blame me and we’d never speak again so I couldn’t fuck everything up. I thought if you found out, I’d lose you both.”

“I’m sorry,” Satsuki said, *Never speak to you again? I hope you know I could never manage that*, “I can’t imagine how that must’ve hurt.”

“Well I dunno. Can you imagine the pain of not being able to be with the one you love?”

Satsuki’s eyes darted down into her lap. *All too well.*

“Then I think you can imagine it just fine,” Ryuko concluded, and let that be that. For a while Satsuki sat, thinking about how sometimes her chest burned with this great, gravitational pull towards Ryuko that demanded that she get closer to her – no matter what, they were never close enough. It was so easy to put herself in Ryuko’s shoes and project that feeling onto Rei, so long as you looked at Rei as Ryuko knew her, not the very different woman Satsuki had grown up with.

“... So if you knew I’d be mad at you, why did you invite me on this little trip?” Ryuko broke the silence.

“What, besides wanting to see you back to your usual self? I wished we could spend more time together. Like back when you were in high school? Those weekends were - I think - the best time of my life. Even if so much has changed between us, I don’t want those days to end.”

Just hearing that nearly brought Ryuko to tears. Something so small, so ordinary, was the best Satsuki had ever gotten in her life. But yet, “Me too. I think – I think I knew that when I went to college, we’d both get so busy that it’d be over.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Satsuki murmured in a tone that read more like : *“Please don’t let it be.”*

“Yeah but, I dunno, don’t you think it’s kinda risky to be doing this considering our, uh, situation?” It did sound like it could be a perfect fantasy – a secret rendezvous in a mountain hideaway. But Satsuki certainly didn’t mean it to be.

“Well, I don’t know, do you think so?”

“Please. Look, you’ve always got your place, er, your place in my heart, but after all this shit I ain’t gonna try and go any further than that, y’know? I’m over it.”

“That’s good. I don’t think I’ll have any trouble either. I have a stronger will than that, as you well know. I know it is right that I never attempt to pass over from sister to lover,” Ryuko shuddered a little to hear the actual word out loud, “and I will not be shaken when I know my aim is pure.”

“Oh yeah? But you still told me in the first place? How pure is that?” Ryuko shot back lightheartedly.

“Well, how pure would it have been to keep secrets from my own sister? Come now,” Satsuki responded with a smile, although she had to admit to herself Ryuko had a point. But it got a little laugh from Ryuko, and that was what mattered.

“By the way, you said once that you sold every property we had that you couldn’t find a use for. So, what’s the use for this one?” Ryuko asked, surprising Satsuki because she thought Ryuko had gone back to looking out the window, less sulkily than before.

“Oh, well, to be honest,” Satsuki sighed in response, “This is the home I plan to retire to, should the day ever come when the world no longer needs me.”

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When they finally arrived the manor itself turned out to be very different from what Ryuko had expected. Most of the Kiryuin homesteads were great monuments of neoclassical marble and stone, imposing monoliths with vaulted, empty ceilings. But this was far older, a converted traditional Japanese mansion. It still had the classic signs of Ragyo’s gaudy handiwork, clear as fingerprints. Gilding and velvet in every room, an excess of cushions and statues, artwork both traditional and modern on all the walls (why did she always hoard all this artwork if she hated the humans that made it, Ryuko wondered). Large paper lanterns on the eaves cast everything in a soft orange glow. It went against the minimalism that actual traditional Japanese architecture valued, but Ryuko couldn’t help but think it was less tacky than most of Ragyo’s lairs. Combined with all the televisions and other technology, it was like another world’s vision of the future.

Satsuki had to go tend to the reason she’d come at all – to meet with the heads of staff and see what needed to be done with the place, and how the lives of the staff could be improved, so Ryuko had free reign to explore the manor and grounds.

“It’ll just be a couple of hours, then I’ll be done with work for the weekend and we can find something to do. So get familiar with the place, okay?”

So Ryuko wandered the manor – library, dining hall, kitchens, an unnecessary seeming number of lounges – and everywhere had to keep telling the house staff to stop bowing and stop calling her “Lady Ryuko”. Then, onto the grounds, which were no less impressive. The back deck opened up onto a lake, right behind the house, and with a wide patio and grassy knolls with fountains it looked like an amazing place for a barbeque. No pollution either, Ryuko had never seen water so clear. And there were fish!

It was all perfect, Ryuko decided as she strolled through the garden. Satsuki could have a wonderful retirement here someday. Too bad that would never happen. She'd never retire, Ryuko was sure of that even if Satsuki insisted otherwise. And if she did one day have to stop working, leave her mission to lesser intellects, it would be because she was too old and infirm. Every creak of worn-down limbs and lapse of once-sharp mind would be torture for her. And – what Ryuko liked to imagine would be the worst part – she wouldn't be by Satsuki's side then. Not the way she wanted.

*The world really is unfair*, Ryuko's thoughts turned to bitter fumes as she made her way into the sports complex on the other side of the gardens – another thing Satsuki would never use the way it deserved. All at once it struck her just how ludicrous her present situation with Satsuki and Rei was. She had not one but *two* of the most beautiful and amazing women who'd ever lived who loved her, and all three of them by any logic should've had it better than this.

She had such incredible unasked-for power – go anywhere, do anything – why didn't it seem to make anything better? Satsuki was so smart she had contingencies years in advance, why was she so irrational that she'd fallen in love with her own sister, so stubborn that she'd never quit her work even though she'd earned it more than anyone? And Rei, she wasn't far behind in intelligence, and yet here she was dating, having all kinds of drama with the daughter of the woman who'd enslaved her for as long as she could remember, why didn't she know better? Ryuko knew that Rei feared losing all her friends if she fully broke up with Ryuko, how had she let her life become so dependant on Ryuko's? Who made us all so stupid?

*Is it something wrong with me?* Ryuko thought as she inspected the empty tennis court, remembering wistfully that Hakodate didn't even play tennis anymore. *It makes sense. I am the common link here.* Having concluded that it was easy to imagine any number of things that were *definitely* why her love life had spiraled out of control: stupidity, lust, fear of confrontation, craving constant contact, the goddamn Silence. *But it's not my fault! You can't blame me for something I didn't even know it was doing! If only I'd known how to be better, but it's like I'm only seeing half the picture. If only my other half wasn't dead.* She railed to no-one, seeming quite calm outwardly, as she walked past a driving range, batting cages

Batting cages... It would feel nice to hit something right about now...

Her first swing was atrocious. She held the bat like a sword, swung way too early, and the pitching machine threw a perfect strike right by her. Even in her self-loathing mindset, Ryuko had to laugh at her own incompetence.

“Ohoho man. Well, how long has it been since I tried to hit a baseball anyway?”

The second went better, she made contact and used *almost* correct form, but put far too much hybrid strength behind it so the bat cracked in two and the ball was pulverized into string. But the third (after she found a new bat) was much better, and the fourth, and the fifth, until before long she was rhythmically launching grand slams down to the netting on the far side of the cages. A little Roomba- type robot came out to pick up the balls (*Shiro would love that*, she thought), and after she accidentally pulverized one another appeared

she considered making a game of trying to hit them, but that seemed cruel and besides she didn't know how many there were.

It was satisfying to feel the wood quake and bend in her fingertips, to see the ball fly in its perfect arc again and again, to remind herself that she despite any other flaws she was still a brutal badass. She barely even noticed the time fly by until suddenly Satsuki was there, walking across the gardens towards her. She'd changed out of her business attire into a pretty little sundress with deep blue on the shoulder straps and hems and a thick black leather belt, and Ryuko kept swinging, letting her pretend she'd surprised her.

"Well, I must say I didn't expect this. I take it you're impressed with our athletic facilities?"

"I dunno," Ryuko grunted between swings, "I just felt like hitting something. Love the little robots though."

"Indeed, although it looks like you didn't love them enough to not smash one to bits."

"Aw I know, I felt so bad for 'im. Hey, maybe we can have a little robot funeral later! Mako'd get a kick out of that."

"Hmm, seems frivolous to me. But then this is a vacation. Still, what *would* you like to do Ryuko?"

"I dunno..." Ryuko trailed off, but she noticed that Satsuki's eyes flitted between her and the rack of extra bats, "You wanna join me? Plenty of open cages."

"Why, certainly," Satsuki smiled, "It's been quite a while since I played baseball."

"Oh, but you'll get your dress all sweaty."

"I don't sweat, Ryuko," Satsuki chided with a smirk as she selected her bat.

"What? C'mon Sats we all know that's bullshit. Even I sweat."

"Ryuko in spite any other charms you may possess --"

"-May? -"

"- You remain an utter barbarian. I, despite by and large renouncing the title, remain a lady. And ladies do not sweat," Satsuki rarely joked around like this, but she was so happy to see Ryuko back in high spirits. Also, it was exactly like Mako said – after sadness came anger, and demolishing baseballs seemed pretty angry to her – it was just taking longer than she'd thought!

"We'll see about that, Sats. You've got your work cut out for you if you want to beat my record."

They spent the rest of the afternoon there – first at the batting cages – then the other sports when that grew boring. Ryuko swung righty, Satsuki lefty so that they could face each other and talk. This posed no problem for them, both being ambidextrous – Ryuko’s natural, Satsuki’s trained.

“Hey, so which is your original?” Ryuko asked between swings.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your hand, I mean. Were you right-handed or lefty?”

“Oh, I see. I was born left-handed.”

“Really. That’s funny though because you’ve always *\*Hrrrut!\**,” Ryuko grunted mid-sentence as she hit another perfect home-run, “preferred your right for swords.”

“That’s in part because my masters when I was learned were all right handed, and in part because it gives my opponent some small measure of handicap.”

“Geez, you really gotta be so cocky?”

“Maybe I do. When there’s a good fight to be had, why not have it rather than win outright? I must admit my fondness for the sport is not always reasonable.”

“Nah man, I get it. I mean, you’d think – after all the just... terrible times I’ve had while fighting, I’d never want anything to do with it, right? And I don’t wanna kill nobody either. But I just gotta admit: sword-fighting is the best sport there is.”

“I wouldn’t dream of arguing with that. No more direct way to test yourself against another person.”

“It’s like the yin to sex’s yang – exact opposites but like, just as great.”

“*What on Earth?*” Satsuki blurted in response, utterly confounded. Her next swing was just a hair off from perfect

Ryuko grinned and laughed, “C’mon Sats, I’m kidding! Well, mostly, anyway. No way sex is half as good as fighting, c’mon.”

Satsuki stared at her, “You’re still joking, aren’t you?”

“Now you’re catching on.”

“Hmm. Well, perhaps there is some degree of merit to your theory. I must admit that there is nobody I have found nobody more satisfying to duel with than you.”

“Pssh, that’s just cuz you like seeing my tits bounce around. Or maybe it’s my ass? I dunno, point still stands,” In fugue state of repetitive swings Ryuko blurted that out without thinking, and since she didn’t have a free hand to cover her mouth she decided to just roll with it.

Another less than perfect swing from Satsuki.

“... The real question though, is why fighting with words isn’t the same at all.”

Satsuki frowned, “I wish I had an answer.”

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In the crisp, warm air of the early evening Ryuko and Satsuki finally abandoned the sports complex and made their way back up to the back deck for dinner. There were many plants in bloom, butterflies and other little creatures filled the flowers with their fuzzy little forms – Ryuko couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen butterflies.

“Y’know, I was so mad at you I didn’t want to come, but I’m glad I did. It’s really very...,” Ryuko looked over at Satsuki, and as the sun’s bottom rim reached the distant mountains her skin glistened with... it couldn’t be sweat. Sweat didn’t make you *glow*. “... Beautiful.”

“I knew you’d like it, you’ve got a better eye for the finer things than you’d dare let on,” They’d just been talking – or rather Satsuki had been lecturing – about the various statues in the garden. What they represented: Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, or just beauty, and Ryuko had listened with rapt attention. “You know, I was so happy when you became interested in fashion design. I would’ve clapped for joy, but I thought you were too disturbed by the parallels with – well, I won’t say the name,” Ryuko nodded at that, “I hope you don’t still feel that way, do you?”

“I mean, you’ve thought about it, right? Do you see her in something that you do, an interest or a habit you wonder if it’s how you really are or if it’s hereditary or if it’s...”

“... something else. Like a part of... her lives on,” They’d stopped walking by this point, and stood next to a small fountain, dappled with mildew and lined with lily pads. Damselflies danced between the white petals. “I have thought about it. Sometimes I feel like if I didn’t have some battle to fight – with weapons or words – I would go crazy. I don’t want to feel that way, but I do,” Hard words for Satsuki to say, because she knew full well the battles needed to be fought, either way. “Or... well...,” She gestured at Ryuko.

Ryuko frowned a little, “Right, Hapsburgs.”

“I don’t know if this is what you need to hear, Ryuko, but I have something that gives me some small degree of peace.”

“Tell me.”

“If we are her, then we are her, but *better*. Her gifts, without the hate and the horror. We are here to turn things back and set right her wrongs.”

Ryuko gulped in spite of herself, a bit of sting in the corner of her eye, “That’s stupid Sats,” She lied, “You can’t just say anything about *her* was good, just so we can feel better about ourselves.”

Satsuki shrugged, reached up, brushed a strand of hair from Ryuko's face, "Maybe you're right. I think that all the time too. But I try not to, not since I told you how I felt. In the end we are who we are, good or bad is irrelevant. The only judgment on us will be what we do ourselves. What legacy we leave behind. And how can we leave a legacy to be proud of, if we cannot embrace who we are?"

None of this was planned, and even though Satsuki said she'd thought it before she'd never put it so clearly in words. Or thought it without a million counterarguments also coming to mind. But standing there with Ryuko, in the one place out of all her inherited properties she chose to keep because she wanted to live there, strange thoughts entered her head and went unremarked upon by the saner aspect of her mind.

This angel, the whole world knew she'd saved them, eight billion people wished her nothing but joy. She deserved it, more that Satsuki could ever give her. But ridding her of this guilt, that was a start, right? Satsuki knew then that Ryuko had to be given what she wanted, no matter what. Even if God, the universe, or whatever would judge her for it until the end of time. Ryuko at least never had to face them.

She never even thought about what she herself wanted. But there was strife there, and her body knew it.

Ryuko felt Satsuki's heartrate rising as her fingers brushed her cheek. Heard her breath coming quicker and shallower, noticed that she was moving closer. "I mean, I suppose."

"You have no reason to hate or fear yourself, Ryuko, none at all," Satsuki murmured tenderly, and in that moment Ryuko saw what was going to happen next. Satsuki leaned closer as Ryuko grabbed her hand, and something electric passed through it. And Ryuko made a split-second decision.

Satsuki's pride couldn't take being the one to cave first. And she didn't deserve any more misery.

It was a quick, fluid motion. Ryuko stood up on the balls of her feet, put an arm on Satsuki's neck, closed her eyes, and their lips met. And she kept them there as long as she could manage, even as Satsuki's eyes shot wide open, her heartrate skyrocketed, flushed red warmth spread across her smooth, pale, sweat-beaded face, and every tiny little feature of her body only a hybrid could detect went wild like alarm bell sounding out, warning Satsuki about something she couldn't even identify.

What! What is happening to me! This was her only conscious thought after she realized that yes, Ryuko had just kissed her. Warring instincts, carefully conditions over all her years, paralyzed her: submit and let it happen, fight back and push her away. There was a new one too: enjoy it for all it's worth. But none of the three could win out. She reflexively grabbed Ryuko's waist, not a sensual motion but a rough one, like a drowning man clinging to driftwood. And there she stayed until Ryuko relented.

"I'm sorry, I lied. I'm not over you. I never will be," Ryuko whispered as they parted, eyes now mere inches from each other, Satsuki's short, silky hair falling nearly down

to Ryuko's ears. Sanity returned, and with it, a tectonic shift between those brilliant blue eyes as they met, perfectly, interlocking. Their bodies slotted together so well, so naturally. Satsuki knew which of those instincts she wanted to follow. Ryuko could only wait and hope, hope that she hadn't just made everything exponentially worse. It seemed possible to hope now. Finally, Satsuki's judgment came.

"In the end, we are who we are."

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In retrospect it was inevitable, from the moment that Satsuki decided she could no longer keep her feelings secret from Ryuko. Even the strongest will cracks, if its fracture point is located.

The moral quality of people, how good or bad they are, is not based solely on who they are inside, but also their actions. Does one sin against morality make a good person bad? What about a person who isn't sure where they stand? What if it opens up the floodgates and allows its brethren through? What if, even considering that the floodgates did indeed open, that one sin would become the essential first step in saving the world from self-destruction?

These questions don't necessarily have easy answers. Certainly, one might say two sisters embracing their love for each other is far from the least immoral thing possible. But one might disagree just as easily. Either way, the consequences of this action – which would reverberate in history for eternity thereafter, did not occur to Ryuko and Satsuki as they stood in the fading golden light of evening.

This was the beginning of a time they would thereafter refer to as "The Weekend," when they chose to spit in the face of morality and consequences, just this once, and live together as they might have in a simpler world.

## Chapter End Notes

Also do note this is a multi-chapter segment. I'm thinking we'll probably wind up with 47 chapters total.

# The Weekend: Saturday.

## Chapter Notes

<https://youtu.be/S5RWimhicIU>

I really strongly encourage you listen to this one while you read if you can. I think it fits the atmosphere just right.

October 2066

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Satsuki woke that morning to a sensation that was rare for her. A sort of fuzzy, comfortable blankness, like an ink blot, filling both body and mind. She'd had a good night's sleep for the first time in months, and was rewarded with a sublime, well-rested feeling.

She tried to move, but something held her back. *Oh, right.* Ryuko's arms, wrapped around her chest like a vice grip. One threaded under her armpit and right across her breasts, no way that wasn't very intentional, and the other just a little lower under the hourglass curve of her torso. Her hand had snuck up under Satsuki's shirt and was playing across the soft surface of her belly.

Satsuki could feel all of Ryuko. Her chin nestled into her shoulder, her breath purring past her ear, her breasts squeezed up on her back, their legs entangled together. And it scared her. Every second they remained like this was a drop of acid eating away at the possibility that things could ever be normal between them again. It was almost entirely disintegrated now. Satsuki knew well the fable of the sword of Damocles, an inevitable doom hanging over the head of those who would rule. It felt like the sword had just become a giant sledgehammer.

And she understood now why Ryuko sometimes referred to Rei as "this bitch" in tones of love and admiration. *This bitch. Look what she's made me do this time. And I like it too much to stop.*

But frightening or not, it was so, so nice. This primal comfort of another person's warmth and smell and feeling. *Yes, it is fitting that we should huddle together for safety. We are such small creatures in the face of a cold, uncaring universe. We must turn to each other for warmth.*

But there was a reason I need to get up right? ... Oh, yes... bathroom.

Satsuki tried again to move Ryuko's arms, but when she did, Ryuko stirred and murmured.

“Mmm... getting up? I’ll come too...” Ryuko squinted in the light that filtered through traditional wood-slat shades.

“No, stay here, I’m just going to the bathroom.”

“Nah, nah, I’ll come too.”

“... to the bathroom?”

“Whu?”

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Oh, heh, okay you do that,” She released her grip on Satsuki, stretching her arms above her head in a catlike motion. “Wait,” When Satsuki turned back to her, Ryuko lifted a finger to her chin and guided her into a kiss, thrilled that she could just do this whenever she wanted, all too aware that that would probably change come Monday.

Oh this bitch, Satsuki thought as Ryuko added a little extra tongue just before they parted, just one night and she’s already got me wrapped around her finger. I was right way back when – Ryuko really is my most formidable enemy. I want to fight her just to prove I’m not completely beaten.

“Okay, you go pee now,” Ryuko shoved her away with a giggle.

The gigantic master bedroom that Satsuki was padding her way across was the only room on the top story of the manor, save for its adjoining bathroom and walk-in-closet. Three of four sides opened onto balcony, so the subrooms and stairwell were clustered over there. A carpeted “conversation pit”, a little nook almost as comfortable looking as the bed itself, filled the center of the room, at the press of a button a flatscreen television could rise from one side of it, perfect for viewing from both the pit and the bed. Aside from that, only a few columns of golden Ivy and extra cushions adorned the room – the simplicity of it was one thing Satsuki really loved about it. One of the few places she’d ever looked at and said “*I’d like for that to be my bedroom*”.

And the ceiling, though low, was adorned with an extraordinary fresco depicting the Shinto pantheon. Right above the bed, Amaterasu stood with a serene smile and rays of sunlight, and on either side were Izanagi and Izanami, the first man and woman (also the namesake of Shiro’s Kamui). Another thing to love about this room. Someone had put real love into this fresco, and it was high time it watched over someone who appreciated it right.

When Satsuki got back, she lay down facing Ryuko this time. Although still seeming half asleep, Ryuko was quick to put her arms back around Satsuki and give her a quick “welcome back” peck.

“Wha’s time?”

“Early,” Satsuki answered, “Let’s not get up just yet.”

“Mhm... y’know you were thrashin’ around real fierce-like, so I squeezed you until you stopped. Sorry you couldn’t move.”

“That’s alright. It was nice, if a little tight.”

“Nightmare?”

“Yes.”

“... You can tell me about it if you want.”

“No that’s... that’s alright,” Satsuki answered, “I am in control of it.”

An endless field of corpses and wet sand beneath roiling, ashy clouds. The body of a tiny girl, just a toddler, in her hands.

“Besides, it’s not exactly a pleasant thing.”

A monolithic statue of a naked woman, arms outstretched, head lost in the clouds that exuded a feeling of utter dread across the plains. Muttering “No, I don’t want to go, I don’t,” over and over again, even as her own feet kept plodding forwards, carrying the broken body of her four-year-old self ever onwards towards the woman’s towering presence.

“Really it’s no problem. At least I *can* sleep,” Satsuki said, alluding to what Ryuko had told her the night before. Ryuko didn’t respond; she’d drifted back off again.

“Sweet dreams, Ryuko.”

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*“You need someone else in the bed to go to sleep?” Satsuki had asked, not because she hadn’t understood Ryuko’s explanation but just because she’d never heard of such a thing before. “You do realize this is... taking things to another level, even with what we’ve already done?”*

*“I know, I know! Don’t you think I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t dead serious?”*

*“Well, I’m not sure. Look,” Satsuki sighed, “You might, and I know you might because I also want it. But I think – even though I’ve had a wonderful time with you today, that might be... a boundary we couldn’t come back from.”*

*“Maybe. Here, let my try again: Have you ever had an old wound you just couldn’t stop picked at? And itch you could never quite scratch? That’s The Silence, except it’s in my head. If I don’t get anything to distract me from it, it’s like my whole brain starts going fuzzy. Especially when I’m trying to sleep.”*

*“And you mean to imply that that’s why you had so many one-night flings?”*

*“Dead serious. It is,” Ryuko crossed her arms resolutely, but Satsuki could tell she didn’t know what she’d do if she still didn’t believe it. People only acted this way when they*

*were telling the truth, she'd learned.*

*"Well that's... I only wish you'd told someone sooner."*

*"Ah, who'd believe? Even you were on the fence."*

*"Yes, but you experienced something nobody before you ever did, and... I suppose what I mean to say is I'm sorry for doubting you."*

*"... Thanks."*

*"And you can sleep with me, of course. Aw, c'mere," At the invitation, Ryuko practically flung herself into Satsuki's arms. "Is it hard to talk about?"*

*Ryuko sniffled, "I say to myself that I'm over it, that I went out and lived my life, just like he wanted. I didn't choose this. Without him, it's like I'm not whole."*

*Satsuki marveled at what an amazing, transcendental, but also tragic thing this was. She'd know Ryuko was strong, she'd survived for months all on her own with no hope left in the world. But this was something else. She felt like crying too, but she just looked down at Ryuko tenderly.*

*"And you want to know what's the scariest part? When Rei left, you remember how Nonon found me?"*

*"She said you'd passed out."*

*"No, no. I felt so alone, and then all of a sudden it was back, and the fuzz was so strong, I couldn't even think. I could still see and everything, but I couldn't stop myself from falling over and just slumped down on the wall. I was a goddamn vegetable just because of one stupid fight!"*

*"That's awful. I can't even imagine."*

*"I didn't even know to be afraid. What the hell is that, huh Sats? I couldn't even say 'oh no, I'm in trouble'."*

*"It's lucky she found you."*

*"But that's the thing! One day, everyone's gonna die except me. Like, everyone, extinct. Not soon, but eventually."*

*"You've been listening to Shiro, haven't you? Well, I suppose he is right."*

*"No but – but listen. When that happens, I'm afraid, I'm afraid I'll..."*

*"Fade away with nobody to wake you?" A fate worse than death, Satsuki realized. Like being buried alive. The moment she said it Ryuko clung to her even tighter, and Satsuki saw a thin trail of a tear down her cheek.*

*“I don’t want to go, I don’t. I guess nobody does, maybe I’m just being greedy.”*

*“No, don’t say that. It’s frightening, I can see that. But I’m here, for now, even if that isn’t much in the grand scheme of things.”*

*“I’m scared for the others, and their Kamui too,” Ryuko murmured, “I don’t know if we made the right choice. What if they have to live with this too?”*

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They did a lot of talking that weekend – old memories, stories they’d heard, things they liked and disliked, abstract concepts of philosophy (mostly Satsuki talking, Ryuko listening) – but rarely ever about what was happening between them. Ryuko was all too aware of the fleeting nature of this moment, afraid that any mention of the future could burst this magical little bubble, so she made the conscious choice to not think any further forward than the next half-hour, the next five minutes. As she had so many times before. And Satsuki, she was too bemused by the froth of new emotion in her. To live with someone you loved like this, she’d never thought she could do that. And she couldn’t waste time planning out what would come after until she understood this new experience.

After a late breakfast / brunch, they went out into the surrounding forest for what began as a hike, became a race, and ended as a leisurely stroll with held hands and Ryuko’s head resting on Satsuki’s shoulder.

“- So I’m confused, you don’t have to shave your legs?” Satsuki was asking as they neared the peak of a nearby hill.

“Nah, not usually. Doesn’t grow most of the time.”

“And does the hair on your head, or anywhere else?”

“Not usually.”

“But I’ve seen you have longer hair before, so... you’re telling me you can control the length of your hair?”

“I think so,” Ryuko quickly held up a finger in defense, “Buuuut it’s not like I can just say ‘I want my hair shoulder length,’ and then poof! That’d be crazy.”

“Right. *That* would be crazy.”

“Well, wouldn’t it? Nah, what it’s like is when my hair grew out a bit last winter, I’d been thinking a lot about what I’d look like with longer hair, and then one morning I woke up with my hair just a little bit longer!”

“I see. And your legs?”

“Yeah, I had to shave then. But not since.”

“That’s a surprisingly useful ability. But you still have to brush your teeth, I’ve noticed. Your powers aren’t omnipotent, it would seem.”

“Nah, that’s just ‘cuz of halitosis Sats! Wouldn’t hurt me none to have my own little plaque farm – you should be grateful I’m so considerate to the rest of you.”

“Oh!” Satsuki exclaimed with a short laugh, “I didn’t think it was so simple. Ah, here’s where I was talking about,” Satsuki lead Ryuko up to the peak, where a break in trees and a nice flat rock created a natural lookout point. The morning fog was just lifting off the trees in steaming trails that made the air humid and sticky, and the lake was dark and glassy, smooth as a mirror from this height. Other mansions dotted its edge amongst the autumn forest. This was an isolated nook – cultivated exclusively for the ultra-wealthy. Once.

“Wow, there’s a hell of a lot of mansions out here. Like a whole little village,” Ryuko said admiringly as they sat down and she returned her head to its place.

For some reason – even she didn’t really know, it was spur of the moment - she’d decided that Satsuki and her should swap clothing that morning. A quick search in the walk-in closet and she’d found a pleated white blouse and black skinny jeans. She wore the blouse buttoned so low it might as well have been open, but then who was around to see but Satsuki. And it wasn’t like she was alone in showing skin – Ryuko’s t-shirt was a bit too short on Satsuki, and so was that green army jacket she’d been wearing recently. But of course she didn’t mind *that*.

“Most of those are empty right now, their owners arrested for tax evasion or something similar.”

“So what’s gonna happen to ‘em?”

“Sold or given to someone worthy, I’d say.”

“Makes sense to me,” Ryuko shrugged. “Be fun if we got the whole gang moved in up here one day. Take a boat over to Mako’s for a cookout. But nah, let ‘em live where they want.”

“Quite, we’ve all got so much more to do before we can think of settling down. Oh, y’know, speaking of hair, I’ve been thinking of growing mine out again. What do you think?”

“Oh shit!” Ryuko exclaimed excitedly, “Wow, talk about a tough decision. I mean, ask me it’s like picking an ice cream flavor. It’s all good options.”

“Really?” Satsuki smiled, “Well, lay it out your thinking for me then.”

“Okay, well first off, the long hair was sooo beautiful. I kinda wish you had it back just so I could run my fingers through it,” Satsuki smiled and looked down, abashed. “Also it’s really iconic. I think you’ll probably show up in the history books with long hair. And it *is* how you looked when I first, er, met you... that’s gotta mean something, right?”

“I see. And do you still imagine me like that, I wonder.”

“The old you. See that’s what I was getting to, is that this short hair is what I think of when I think of you now, the long hair how you were back then. Which I, now that I look back on it, was still pretty damn incredible.”

“You were already in love with me long before then, don’t lie. I felt it from your blood in Junketsu.”

“Maybe,” Ryuko giggled, looking up at her and thinking, *loved you or not, I never dreamed I’d spend a tender moment like this with you. I thought you’d hate something like that*, “but what I was gonna say is most people do *not* agree. Everyone loves you now - then, well, less so.”

“I see, yes. That is a concern I’ve considered. I’m weighing if, now that the Kamui are done and open combat is now in the cards soon, I should be seen in the public spotlight as a sort of “return to form”. Or if that would cause too many fears of a return to dictatorship.”

“I dunno. Probably the latter. But you know what else?”

“What?”

“With that short hair of yours I get to look at that goddamn outrageous neck of yours,” She threw a hand up around the back of that slender, shapely neck immediately, and Satsuki jolted in surprise. “I’m not trying to strangle you, I swear,” Ryuko quipped as Satsuki relaxed.

“I must say, I didn’t expect that to figure into your reasoning.”

“Well, it’s just so damn long! Like, in terms of your best features it’s right up there with your boobs, ass, face, hair, hips, legs... uh, y’know what, nevermind.”

“That’s very sophisticated of you, Ryuko,” Satsuki hum-chuckled. “I wonder, when did you first notice that?”

“Oh, I’ve known about it since I first laid eyes on ya. Actually, my first thought when I saw you was ‘damn, she looks like a real monster of a bitch,’ my *second*, though, was, ‘too bad, she’s wasting a really slammin’ bod on evil’.”

“So it wasn’t love at first sight.”

“ ‘Fraid not, I’m not *that* romantic. Nah, I’d say it was probably on the *Naked Sol*, y’know, when we finally made up and everythin’.”

“Makes sense. That *is* when you learned that I’d... changed my mind about certain things.”

“Right!” Ryuko said, then looked at Satsuki expectantly.

“Er...”

“Well, c’mon! I wanna hear yours now.”

“Oh, of course. Hmm...,” Satsuki ruffled her fingers through Ryuko’s hair as she thought, “Well, it would have to be when you gave Bakuzan back to me after our fight in Osaka.”

“No-ho shit,” Ryuko laughed.

“It’s true. I realized then that, under all the coarse vulgarity, you still had your honor. ‘The Satsuki Kiryuin I know,’ you said, and I thought, ‘She knows nothing of my life,’. But then I realized none of that mattered – you knew me as a worthy rival, and that was the core of it. That was when I decided that, if I survived my encounter with Ragyo, I’d find a way to make you my wife. But then, well, you know the rest.”

“Jeez, you’re so dramatic,” Ryuko muttered, but she was blushing a little bit.

“And why not? No half measures in my life, not when I can help it.”

“Still, I’d never have guessed it’d be that moment. Y’know, I never thought that -,” Ryuko was going to say *that I’d be having this conversation with you*. But no, that felt like it might remind Satsuki that what they were doing now was wrong. “Nevermind.” Satsuki didn’t ask what she’d wanted to say. Perhaps she got some sense of what Ryuko was going to say as well.

“I had my fantasies before then, of course,” Satsuki said after a moment, and when Ryuko quirked her eyebrows she smiled wistfully, “What, are you surprised? Even I have my private thoughts, you know.”

“... go on then, why don’t you?” Ryuko said leadingly with a mischievous grin.

“I wondered, idly of course, it wouldn’t have worked in practice – what might have happened if I’d turned you over to my side. If the fight club had worked out and you’d been given a place in the Elites, or maybe just if I had you kidnapped. I’d have you as my loyal bodyguard, my mad dog, my executioner, and – eventually – my bedwarmer. Oh, the things I’d have done to you to guarantee your loyalty and... break you in, so to speak,” Satsuki stopped there, aware that her words were having an effect on Ryuko.

“Oh yeah? What kind of things?” She breathed.

But Satsuki immediately blushed and chuckled, “Honestly, you’d probably find it terribly vanilla. I’m not as... experienced as you.”

“Ah bullshit, I’m only twenty. Hell, I don’t think I really had much technically *good* sex until I met Rei.”

“Don’t talk about her here!” Satsuki snapped, and Ryuko sat bolt upright. She hadn’t considered, since *I’m dating Rei* was such an integral backdrop of her thoughts in a way Haruka or even Mako hadn’t been, that Satsuki was still terribly jealous.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too, I didn’t mean for that to come out that way,” Satsuki sighed.

“Still, brainwashed by Satsuki Kiryuin, turned into her bodyguard... I think I’d I’ve liked that. But the new Satsuki – not one who’d you use me to conquer the world.”

“Well I’ve no use for slaves now, even willing ones.”

“Then a combination of the best of old and new?” Ryuko said, and then suddenly snapped her fingers, “What about shoulder length hair like mine? Best of both?”

“Hmm, not a terrible idea. Might send just the right message. But I’m afraid even a combination of the old and new me might have trouble with brainwashing you.”

“Well, whatever,” Ryuko slid even closer, wrapping her arms fully around Satsuki. This time though it was Satsuki who initiated the kiss, but she was still new at this, a bit stiff and halting. Her conflicting instincts would trip her up each time, nearly breaking her confidence. But she managed it, of course. “This is nice too,” Ryuko said as she lifted herself up and straddled Satsuki’s waist, giving her a very different view to admire.

They were late returning from their hike for lunch. Not that the waitstaff minded. They’d all just learned last evening that there would be a sizeable bonus for each of them (enough to quit this job and start a better life for many of them – just as Satsuki had planned since she wanted to reduce overhead at this estate anyway). So long as they didn’t ask questions, that is.

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“Hey Sats, what was dad like?” This was turn in dinner conversation Satsuki hadn’t expected. They were eating out on the patio, close enough to hear the water sloshing on the docks, and had been having lighthearted conversation about memories of their friends and all their funny little quirks and foibles. Ryuko had also managed to talk Satsuki into one – just one – glass of deep red wine, and with it in her stomach along with the fine food (she was happy see Ryuko was eating too) she felt bubbly and young.

“I think I should be asking you that, you knew him much longer, and I was only four.”

“Yeah, well you were a four-year-old genius, and I was normal dumb me. Plus, you knew the real him, I got the disguise.”

“Hmm, that is true. Well, I’ll do my best, but after you have to tell me your side. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Well, let’s see... Father was a driven man, I suppose you could say. He always had his nose in his work, always scheming, working on some big plan that was never quite done. I suppose I take after him a lot. I also remember that he seemed madly in love with Ragyo, which I at first believed, but then later I realized he was just throwing her off his trail. Must’ve been excruciating, but then I learned my own methods from him. He talked about lots of big political concepts too – I wasn’t ready for them then, and now I can’t recall exactly



what, which is a shame. I always imagined later that he believed in freedom and equality, but maybe it wasn't oppression he opposed, just *Ragyo's* particular brand. I don't know."

"That sounds a lot like mine. Lotta big words I didn't understand, and he didn't feel like explaining."

"Mmm. But he was always very kind to me. No matter what I did, he had some kind of praise. And he talked to me like an adult too, so I guess he knew I'd be ready when he revealed the secret of the life-fibers."

"Well that's a big difference. I didn't see him much, but when I did, it was like I'd already pissed him off, somehow. It was always, "Why'd you have to hit that kid? It's probably your fault you got in trouble. Why can't you just be normal for once? You're lucky I'm generous, or else you'd be out on the street with nothing." Y'know, that kinda stuff. One time, he came to transfer me to a different school when I was in I think third grade, and I made a scene, and he like – I dunno – It was like he didn't even want to touch me. He grabbed me from like arm's length and carried me out like I was a bomb gonna explode in his face."

"But that's terrible! I almost can't believe how differently he treated us."

"I know..." Ryuko trailed off, seeming disappointed.

"Why did you ask, Ryuko?" Satsuki said, concerned that there was something more she wasn't saying.

"Oh I dunno... Just curious. I've been trying to figure out if it was Ragyo made him how he was, or..."

"Or you," Ryuko nodded, very serious. "If you did play in at all, I can only imagine that it was because he felt guilty. For turning you into what you are, and because he knew his plan involved making you a living weapon."

"Guilty or afraid?"

"... Well perhaps a bit of both."

"I wish I'd known the whole story from the start. Do you think he'd be proud of us, if he were still here?"

"Well, we accomplished our mission, so yes, I think so."

"No, but like, how we turned out, ourselves."

"To be honest Ryuko, even when he was kind I think the mission was everything to him. I doubt he would've cared."

Ryuko changed the topic quickly after that.

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That evening they decided to lay out on the grass near the lakeside to watch the sun go down. But the sun was long down, and in the warm early autumn air it was far from uncomfortable, so there they remained, stretched out together with arms around each other, soaking in the sounds of the night.

Satsuki eventually drifted off, and Ryuko laid awake a little longer, looking up at the distant mountains, the cool dark surface of the water, the stars above them, the purple-gold glow of civilization on the horizon.

With her senses the world around her thrummed with life, and between that and Satsuki's far more immediate presence The Silence was gone as completely as she'd ever felt it. Worth staying up for just to appreciate the feeling of complete clear-headedness. There wasn't a single twitching blade of grass, a single gnat in miles that she couldn't sense.

Fish splashed on the surface of the water, snatching up insects. What were those fish called? What did they do all day? Ryuko had no idea. She realized, with a strangely sad feeling, that she didn't know anything at all about what everything she could see around her. Even the mountains – what mountains were those? Someone must've climbed them, but who? What had made them in the first place?

Mountains will rise and fall before your very eyes, oceans come and go, even the continents will slide around until the very surface of the Earth is unrecognizable, Shiro's words floated through her head.

One day all of this will be gone, Ryuko thought, *Including Satsuki,* she added with a shudder, even though she didn't want to. *One day everyone else will be gone and it will just be me and the world.*

My world.

My world, and I know so little about it! Some savior I turned out to be. She brushed a loose strand of hair out of Satsuki's face, listened to her murmur and purr in her sleep. *She'd have done a better job, I'm sure.*

What would Satsuki do if she lived forever? Ryuko thought, but the answer was obvious, *She'd memorize the story of every rock, every tree, every animal and person. Then that's what I'll have to do.*

I guess there's no way around it. I have to do better, be worthy of my world.

Unless I just fade away forever with nobody to talk to...

... Y'know, maybe Shiro's right. Maybe I would like someone to spend eternity with...

She fell asleep with her hair tangled out in the grass, imagining the roots of the earth flowing up through it and into the back of her head, filling her dreams with calm, misty visions of mountains and oceans from ages long past.

The Weekend: Sunday

Chapter Summary

Late and long, that's how we do! The last full chapter for this part.

October 2066

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Satsuki again woke up earlier than Ryuko, although this time because the morning chill and the moisture of the dew were uncomfortable to her frail human body, but meant nothing to the perpetual furnace-heat of a hybrid. When Ryuko proved difficult to rouse, puttering and rolling over, Satsuki gave up and just scooped her up into her arms, which did cause Ryuko's eyes to open just a bit.

“... hey...”

“I guess I should've known you'd be a late riser.”

“... This's nice. Carry me back to bed?” Not the sort of request Satsuki was about to turn down.

On the way, walking up the stairs oh-so carefully, it was obvious that Ryuko was only pretending to still be asleep, keeping quiet so as not to spoil this tender little moment they were sharing. Still, it gave Satsuki a moment to wonder again what the hell was happening to her, and what to do about the burning pull within her that said that this just wasn't enough. They still needed to be closer. But how?

*Look at her; The straightforward, logical part of her mind cut in – she'd been ignoring it a lot this week, You know how. Get that blouse off her, jump on top of her, and ...*

... *And what?* Satsuki realized she had no real idea. The general idea was straightforward, she knew, but what did people do with their free hands during these things? She didn't even know what to do with them while kissing Ryuko. And what if she wasn't any good at it? What if it hurt? Ryuko was experienced, no matter what she claimed, and she'd demand equal performance. Which sounded odd to Satsuki with Ryuko cradled so peacefully in her arms, but it was still true.

*This naivety. Obviously details like that don't matter, just passion. But...*

She set Ryuko down on the bed, sat down beside her and watched as she made an “Ah” noise and snuggled into the covers.

But it was still impossible, Satsuki realized. She just couldn't consider it. It was like the whispers that Junketsu used to pipe into her skull. You had to erect walls around the wrong thoughts, never linger there long, never take them seriously.

What would it help, to satisfy that pull now? Even if they did have... sex... today, come tomorrow they'd just have to go back to normal, knowing they'd never be able to have that intimacy again. And that was so horrible, a sort of personal, emotional horrible that Satsuki didn't usually think about. Having to go back to normal knowing they'd never even be able to kiss again, or talk so openly, that was hard enough. But that was fine - she'd already resolved to spend much more time with Ryuko in the future, and really besides the physical closeness what would be different? They still loved each other, just as before

*But Ryuko was the one who kissed me first. She's been the one to make the first move each time. Love is a physical thing for her. I'm sure she wants – no, expects more,* Satsuki wondered fretfully if Ryuko would blame her for that, even though she was just looking out for them. *She doesn't concern herself with such practically – I wish I could do the same. It will be hell for her come tomorrow.*

*Unless...*

"God help me," She murmured morosely, shutting that idea down as soon as she'd thought it, "I've finally cracked, haven't I?"

"Huh?" Ryuko asked, cracking her eyes open. For her part all she saw was a sweet, serene, but slightly sad smile from Satsuki. *The wife of Satsuki Kiryuin, she mused, as if I could ever be so lucky. But this is probably what it would feel like. What goes on in that pretty little head of hers, I wonder?*

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"You do a lot of that."

"One of us has to."

"Thanks. What about?"

"If I said you, would that be unbearably romantic?"

"You sap," Ryuko smiled, but it concerned her a little. If Satsuki was thinking, it could only be about how soon this day would end. And she'd probably start wondering what the point of keeping this little charade up any longer was – reasonable, but not acceptable. She opened her eyes all the way and sprung up.

"I assumed you'd sleep more."

"Yeah, well my clothes are all dewy, and my hair's damp. Time for a shower," She started unbuttoning her blouse, but when she looked over at Satsuki she froze. Because she was also frozen, staring in alarm – partially alarm at her own interest, but alarm,

nevertheless. “Pssht. Screw that,” Ryuko decided, “You’ve seen me naked plenty, what do you give a shit for?”

“You’re right, of course. What was I thinking,” Satsuki said with an awkward chuckle. Ryuko continues undressing, but she didn’t look back at Satsuki as she did so.

So when she turned around and found her also undressed it was quite a surprise. Again, they stared at each other in surprise. Ryuko’s initial reaction of “*Why has she done this?*” was overshadowed immediately when she noticed that Satsuki had taken off her bra too, and - *My god I really wish I was Mako right now. Just having the precedent of groping people out of the blue would be heaven right now. But Mako will be Mako, and I’m not her, and Why The Hell Did She Do This?*

It was Satsuki who broke the silence when she noticed that Ryuko’s face had taken on an uncomfortable looking red color, suddenly worried that her own snap decision to undress had been the wrong one, “You know, I sort of imagined that after we got rid of most of the life-fibers nudity would become no big deal in human society. But I guess it’s still an engrained instinct to cover our bodies, and those don’t go away overnight.”

“Well, ah, I mean I wear clothes because I like how I look in them. Isn’t that enough?”

“Perhaps. Maybe that’s a good philosophy to have. An alliance between humans and our clothing.”

“I mean if that’s how you wanna think of it be my guest... er, you didn’t think we were gonna shower... together, right?”

“No, I...” Satsuki trailed off, trying to figure out if Ryuko wanted her to say yes, wanted her to make this a reality, *Naked, wet bodies pressed against each other*, Satsuki felt a sudden rise in that burning pull inside of her, and all of a sudden she was terrified, *No, I can’t consider that*. “My clothes got soaked by the dew as well, it’s uncomfortable. I’ll just wait here.”

“Well yeah, you got that right,” Ryuko said as she turned to the bathroom. The instinctive part of her screamed at her to make her move now, there’d never be another better time, but instead she said, “Alright, I’m wearing my own outfit today, okay? Can ya put that jacket in the dryer or something?” She looked back at Satsuki and saw a sort of confused, lost look on her face. “What?”

Another layer of intimacy, another boundary they should never have crossed and which would make it even more impossible to return to normal life, shattered. She was losing control over things again, which of course she was, that always happened with Ryuko. But even now, the pull didn’t stop. It burned more than ever, and Satsuki had to distract herself with boring, practical thoughts of work to keep it at bay.

“Actually,” Satsuki began, thinking back to the day before when Ryuko had listed her best features and basically included every part of her body, how it felt to be so obviously,

unabashedly, and yet purely desired like that. Maybe Ryuko would like that too. “I quite like the way you look like this, too.”

*Ah Jesus fuck, why is she so cute?* Ryuko could feel the blush growing, and the fantasy of climbing onto her lap and saying, “*Then I’m yours, forever, to use however you like,*” felt like it was within reach.

“Heh, you really are a sap. A sap who’s really got to get laid, but still,” She kept on walking, but right when she reached the bathroom door turned around and said, “I like the way you look too, you know.”

As she heard the water run, and as Ryuko wondered if she’s said the right thing right then, Satsuki flopped onto the bed and stared up and Amaterasu’s impassive face, flush with the power of godly enlightenment. She rested one hand on her forehead, the other on her belly. Nowhere else on her body felt especially clean to touch right then.

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They spend the rest of the day much as they had the last, hiking up into the nearby woodland, playing more sports, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, even at one point taking a rowboat out to one of the empty mansions to snoop around.

On that ride Satsuki lost a bet – badly – that Ryuko couldn’t grab a duck off the surface of the lake. It was an amazing sight to see her porpoise across the water at unreal speeds, snatching the poor creature before it even had a chance to react (she soaked another set of clothing doing it, but oh well). And with a few reassuring coos and a firm but gentle grip it calmed down enough to be pet before they let it flutter off to rejoin its little duck family.

The price for losing that bet was pulling up in secluded nook on the way back from the mansion for about an hour, lost in each other and the gentle rocking of the rowboat, the quiet, peaceful swaying of the leaves on the surrounding trees.

Maybe Satsuki wanted to lose that bet, who could say?

But despite it being sheer bliss, Satsuki’s was only human with less than unlimited energy. Normally she’d have powered through, but Ryuko noticed that she’d taken on that quiet, listless attitude of someone who was tired but didn’t want to admit it.

“So, wanna run a marathon next?” She quipped as a waiter cleared their dinner plates away.

Satsuki hum-chuckled, “Is this your way of asking if I’ve had my fill of physical activity for today?”

“Could be.”

“I’d be upset if you thought I was so easily exhausted, but I must admit that this is a rare break for me, and no break would be complete without time to unwind.”

“Without me, you mean.”

“What? Of course not.”

“Sats, c’mon, I know you. I know you’re not the type of person who likes to spend all day around other people. It’s okay.”

“Don’t be absurd. Well, other people, yes, but not you.”

Ryuko leaned back in her chair, trying to puzzle out what to say next. It was so easy to forget, because of how confident and collected she looked most of the time, that Satsuki didn’t understand some very simple things about relationships. “You really can’t think of a time you’ve been sick of me? I mean I can sure think of plenty fights we’ve had. Er, old days aside, I mean.”

Satsuki sighed, “Fine. Twist my arm. I’ll admit it can be... draining around other people, constantly maintaining my image. I’ve been doing it a long time, and I don’t know how it seems to you but it’s far from effortless. And it can be like that with even you, sometimes.”

“Right, so if you feel like -,”

“Actually, I should be honest. Especially with you.”

“Aw, Sats, you know you don’t need to. You think I really give a shit about your image?”

“Maybe you do more than you think. Why not make sure you see me at my best?” Satsuki so badly wanted to tell Ryuko about how tired she was, this strange feeling that at age twenty-one she was already done with everything important in her life. But she couldn’t shake this feeling that Ryuko didn’t want to know that, in spite of what she said.

“Bullshit,” Ryuko reached over the table to gently wrap her fingers around Satsuki’s hand. She’d decided what she wanted to say, but the moment she started talking it changed, “All I *want* is to see past the image Sats. I feel like – I feel like this weekend I’ve gotten to glimpse that, but you’re telling me you’re still tryin’ to keep me from seeing the real you. I dunno. Feels like you’re holding out on me.”

Satsuki didn’t know what to say to that, and for a moment Ryuko was worried that *she’d* said the wrong thing.

“Now c’mon, what do you most want to do right now?”

“Honestly? Now seems like the perfect time to curl up with a book and some tea.”

“Then you go do that!”

“Well, if you insist,” Yes, that did sound nice, now that she thought about it, “But then, if you really want to see me not trying to keep up any image, why not come along?”

“Oh! Well I guess,” Ryuko shrugged, “I mean, are you sure?”

“Yes. With you, Ryuko, I want to be able to relax the way I can alone,” *Maybe that is what it will take to make this feeling go away. And I didn’t even realize I was doing it!* “But! There must be no talking and no fidgeting. As if you weren’t even there. This is quiet time.”

“Well duh. If that’s what it takes to make you let your guard down I’ll be still as a statue!”

Satsuki gave her a look that said quite clearly, “*Are you sure you’re even capable of that?*”

“You just watch me!”

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Ryuko kept her promise, to Satsuki’s complete surprise. They sat stretched out in the conversation pit in the master bedroom, Satsuki with her tea and her book (a psychology book for her dissertation). The irony wasn’t lost on her that she could read all about these disfunctions and insecurities in others but needed Ryuko to see them in herself. *I guess I should be more honest with everyone else too. They probably still think I’m some kind of machine-woman. Well, even the best made machine eventually wears down, I suppose.*

To Ryuko she seemed to change a lot and not at all at once. She’d almost been disappointed by how little she seemed to change until she noticed a subtle slump, back sinking into the cushions with the weight of the world on her shoulders, the sort of deeply relaxed serenity that came upon her face, the drowsy way her eyes flicked with each page turned. She looked like she’d doubled her age in an instant, but somehow that only made her more graceful and beautiful than ever.

*I might be the immortal one, but Satsuki’s still gonna be beautiful until the day she dies. I hope I’m doing a good job; I hope I’m not distracting her. I wonder how long it’s been – no, it doesn’t matter.* In her position, laying right on top of Satsuki facing the other direction so that Satsuki’s chin rested on her shoulder, there wasn’t much room to squirm without Satsuki’s permission, especially since their legs were entwined. Usually Ryuko was the one getting clambered on, the one whose grip constrained her partner and set their pace. But not having that control could be nice too. *Because it’s Satsuki. Only because it’s her. If anyone else said “you’re now my living hot water bottle” they’d get a quick shove. Not just anybody bosses me around.*

And Satsuki would’ve said Ryuko was doing a good job, even though she was proving a powerful distraction. She’d blame that undernourished part of her mind that had never gotten the chance to progress beyond an early teenager – caught up in how close Ryuko’s breasts, groin, legs, and all the rest were. Or maybe that scientific side that felt all the little miniature movements of Ryuko’s breath, her blood pumping, her muscles twitching, her digestion working beneath it, and marveled that this was a real, living person who’d decided to let her treat her like a big ragdoll. She had to think of them as separate parts of her mind because they kept coming up with thoughts and feelings on their own, and soon they were so distraction that she had to stop reading.



And just bask in Ryuko's presence.

*I'm sure she felt so overwhelmed by having someone near, when she first started dating. She's right, I waited too long. I've only made it harder for myself. But still, this is so nice!*

Giving up on reading did give her plenty of time to think though, and to come to a decision about that pulling feeling that just wouldn't go away. Confessing her love hadn't done it, spending this weekend with Ryuko hadn't either, even being completely relaxed and genuine with her still wasn't close enough. It could only be one thing. She opened her mouth, but Ryuko appeared to have drifted off, bless her.

"Ryuko. Ryuko?"

"Mmm? Yeah Sats?" Ryuko murmured.

"I want to have sex with you."

For that, Satsuki was treated to the adorable sight of Ryuko's face going open-mouthed and beet red as she tried to parse what was just said. *Holy shit holy shit holyshit what? Is this what I get for telling her to be completely genuine?*

*Am I really gonna turn down a direct request like that?*

"Damn girl, uh, that's forward, I respect that," Ryuko sat up, grabbing the hem of her shirt and preparing to yank it off.

"Now hold on, let me finish."

"Eh?" Ryuko made a confused noise.

"That was just to get your attention," Satsuki explained slyly. "Although your reaction was... nice, if not quite what I expected."

"Pfft hahaha-holy shit Satsuki! Is this what I get for telling you to let your guard down – I didn't even know you could joke like that!" Satsuki glowed with pride that she'd managed to make Ryuko laugh. "What's next, you start swearing?"

"Would you like that?"

"It would be beyond hilarious, no lie."

"Well that's very kind, but listen, please. I'm going to try to put something I've been feeling this weekend into words. And... address what we should do going forward"

Ryuko nodded and curled up expectantly, but her heart sank. Yes, it was finally time. Satsuki ran a hand through Ryuko's hair as she continued, "It is true, though. I do want to have sex with you. But not like this."

“I mean why, what’s wrong with like this?” Ryuko said, in part playing devil’s advocate but also realizing she suddenly wanted it more than ever.

“Well – no, you already know what’s wrong – you’re not going to trick me so easily,” Satsuki seemed taken aback, “We said we’d set boundaries, but everything we’ve done this weekend had been shattering them, one by one. And that would be fine, but – what are you smirking about, stop that!”

“Heh. I’m the only one who gets to see you all flustered like this,” Ryuko gloated, “I love that.”

“Ahem! As I was saying, that would be fine, but tomorrow morning we have to go back to society, and if we cannot pretend for all the world that this never happened there will be consequences.”

“No! Don’t say that!” Ryuko was suddenly reminded of something she’d tried very purposefully to forget that Rei knew about them, that they were still on the verge of breaking up, that she was supposed to have a future with Rei, and couldn’t with Satsuki. She buried her face into Satsuki’s chest and blurted urgently, “Let’s just stay here forever. What do they need us for anyway?”

“Hmm. Now who’s being flustered?”

“Yeah well why not? I don’t want to go back. Everything’s so *simple* here.”

“I know, I know. Listen, I know that just as well as you. I was serious when I said I wanted to marry you before. But for all the wrong reasons. In the world I lived in back then, a spouse was a trophy, a political tool. I wanted to parade you around at balls: ‘the great barbarian, tamed’-”

“-Pfft!”

“- I’d still love to see you in a ball gown. There are so many things I’ve wished I could share with you, or that I could show you for the first time. But that doesn’t change that I was a fool back then. I never thought you were capable of *this*, I never thought I wanted this. And all this weekend I’ve had this unbearable desire, more than just sexual, and now I know what it is. I want to end every evening like this, share all my thoughts and worries with you and hear yours, and yes, I do want you to be the first and only person I... I experience sexual relations with; everything that everyone else gets so easily!”

Ryuko was practically tearing up just from that, but Satsuki went on, “And I imagine that you feel much the same way, although the details I can’t fathom – you’ve lived a much fuller life than I, not as much tied up in me as I have in you.” *How could you think that?* Ryuko wondered, but Satsuki was on a roll now. “I have been a fool to deprive myself of this for so long, because now that desire will torment me until my dying day so long as we are apart. But who else could ever be as worthy as you?”

Ryuko sprung back, alarmed, “But Sats, you can’t mean that’s how it’s got to be, right? You’re not really just gonna end it now, right?”

Satsuki didn't look at all surprised by her reaction, and instead addressed Ryuko with a serious look, "And do you think it's possible then, Ryuko, for us to show our love freely and publicly?"

"I dunno, maybe? Wha- we don't ask much from the world, can't they just give us this? It's not like other Kiryuins haven't done worse!"

"Other Kiryuins knew better than to marry siblings. They kept it on the plausibly deniable side; cousins and such. And besides, part of my appeal is reform from the corruption of the Kiryuin era."

"Yeah, I know. And I get that you're worried that if you lose your popularity with the people you won't be able to fix everything that's wrong with the world, I do. But I don't think you realize how *loved* we are. I-I have my own religion!"

"*You* are loved universally and unconditionally. I..."

"What, you seriously think people don't love you?"

"Polls indicate that a considerable portion of the population still sees me as power-hungry or... robotic. And especially in other countries. My advisors – including Nonon – *have* suggested that appearing in public with a girlfriend might help dispel that image but..."

"You're kidding. How could they not love you?"

"It's irrelevant, really. If I can make my contribution to the world, my personal life will be of little concern," Satsuki said, but Ryuko could see sadness in her eyes. She didn't deserve, after everything, to still have people who distrusted her. She fell back into Satsuki's arms again.

"But listen, that isn't all I'm worried about. Our friends and family, what about them?"

*Right. Fucking shit.* "I-I mean they'll be happy for us, right?" Mako would be thrilled. But what about her new parents? She couldn't imagine disappointing them. And what about Mataro? God, how could she explain it to any of them? Part of her wanted to believe they'd be happy for her no matter what, but how could she know. And Soroi, what a thing to dump on him in his retirement! If he ever found fault in his lady, now would be the time.

"What about Rei?"

"Fuck. She knows."

"Yes, and she could tell them all. But she hasn't yet, which says at least she knows how important my reputation is."

"Fuck. I mean, it could be bad. Maybe, maybe not. What do we do?"

“Now you understand our situation, I see. Well, fortunately for you this quiet time has given me the opportunity to think, and I’ve come up with what I think will be our best option going forward. And I’ll lay it out plainly, I’m sure you’ll hate that,” Despite her misery, Ryuko smiled at that. Something about Satsuki’s tenderness in that moment made her certain she wouldn’t hate this plan. “And of course, if you object we will discuss this. Clearly, rationally.”

“Right.”

“But once we agree, you have to – for once – adhere to the plan.”

“You say that like I’ve ever disobeyed you before.”

“Disobedience and willful sabotage of my war efforts are not that far apart.”

“Alright, alright whatever. Let’s hear it.”

“Okay. As we have both agreed, going open with our relationship is not entirely possible -,”

“-Well not *agreed*, but-,” Ryuko interrupted.

“-But it’s far too risky. But at the same time, I’ve realized that I haven’t been giving my work my all lately. Until this weekend I’ve been feeling so, so tired. And I need you to keep myself from feeling that way again.”

“-Aww, it’s almost like you love me or something.-“

“-So this is what I’m proposing. We can live like this, but only at my home – the gardener’s cottage on the old Kiryuin Manor grounds. It is secluded, very few people know I live there, and nobody ever visits,” *That sounds kind of lonely*, Ryuko thought, *No wonder she needs me so bad* “You may spend the night twice per week, no more to avoid any suspicion. By day, we will appear as nothing more than affectionate sisters, as it should be. After all, can we not enjoy most of what we’ve done this weekend without our hands and lips all over each other?”

“Well, not *as* much. But yeah. That’s what we’ve already been doing, kind of.”

“Indeed. Truthfully, all that’s really changed is the possibility of brief moments between us – and I will think of them as mental health maintenance, not just romance.”

“Well I suppose that’s how it’s got to be. I don’t like hiding it from our friends and family, but at least I can still see you like this... Ah, fuck but what about Rei? I – she – look, she’s gonna come back eventually I’m sure, but if she finds out about this or even suspects it I don’t know what she’s gonna do.”

“Ah yes, that is the last unresolved piece of this puzzle,” Satsuki sighed, “I want you to break up with Rei.”

Ryuko blinked, “I mean, er, well that’s not my decision to make. I mean, what am I supposed to say!” She truly couldn’t envision what she might say, what Rei might do after that. What reason would she have not to tell everyone? “You can’t just tell me to do something like that. I don’t even know if I want that! I don’t think I do,” She finished more quietly.

“I know,” Satsuki smiled as though she saw that reaction coming. “As you said, sometimes we don’t get what we want. But I need you to know that it hurts me – so, so deeply - to know that I can’t call you mine and mine alone, especially when as you well know you can do so to me.”

“Man, you need to talk to Mako, because I’ve tried to explain what it’s like for us – to be able to love more than one person – but you still don’t believe it. I guess only she can make it sound right.”

“No, I believe it for her. But you, your heart is not all sunshine like Mako’s – she loves the entire human race on sight. You have too much of the Kiryuin ruthlessness, plus your own cynicism. You don’t have love in unlimited supply.”

“Gee, thanks,” Ryuko muttered.

“Oh please, don’t look like that, you know I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Yeah, well still. You ask me to break up with a girlfriend who I can, y’know, be out in the open with? What’s that look like? If it happens, it happens. Look, how about this – I’ll break up with Rei when you agree to date me openly.”

Satsuki furrowed her eyebrows, “Not a deal I can make. But that is my point, I suppose. If you may date other women, you must allow me to do so as well. On both sides our relationship must be invisible.”

“Oh, well of course. But you’re not actually going to, right?”

“If it were of my own volition, no. But I must be honest, Ryuko: The government is currently considering a diplomatic marriage between myself and the daughter of the Executive Minister of Australia. If it goes though, we will peaceably annex both the country and the surrounding islands. I’m not terribly comfortable with this method of diplomacy but being able to spread our reforms there might be worth it. And judging by your face, you wish I’d told you this much sooner.”

“Well yeah! I mean what the hell Sats that’s like, primo despot shit! Why would you go along with this, and with a girl you don’t even know? I mean, shit is she even gay?”

“Make no mistake, this will not be a conquering – more of a league of like-minded nations.”

“Well sure, fine, but what about the girl?”

“Oh, well truth be told I don’t know. I fear it may be a loveless match, but if it goes through, I will do my duty. She is supposed to be quite lovely though,” Satsuki finished with a wistful tone that said it didn’t matter to her at all, and she was instead thinking about the starving children in Australia’s slums that she could save. And all the other ones across the world, who would have their time one day soon too. “Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t cry, it’s alright, this is the path I’ve chosen.

Ryuko had barely noticed the mist growing in her eyes. She cuddled in even further into Satsuki’s bosom, “I want to do more for you than just two nights a week. I know, I can’t. But you gotta tell me these things from now on, okay? I can tell you don’t wanna do it, but if you don’t tell me how can I help you.”

“Okay. I’ll try. Thankyou, Ryuko,” Satsuki murmured, looking down into her gear-shaped pupils with the dreadful symmetry. How cute Ryuko looked, sitting there with only her glassy eyes and the bridge of her nose visible over the curve of her breasts. *Yes, that’s it Ryuko. All the sadness and sweetness you can’t show to anyone else, cry it into me.*

Ryuko never did cry, but they did both sit there thinking for a while. Thinking and soaking in each other. Maybe too much. It was so nice to be in the arms of someone as strong and brave and yet so... mystifyingly innocent as Satsuki. She really was perfect.

“God you smell so good,” Ryuko said after that long pause, and Satsuki could feel the vibration of her voice. She realized her blouse was thin, but it needed to be so, so much thinner. “Are we done talking about this? I think we agree right?”

“If you accept my plan, then certainly,” Satsuki sighed, “And doesn’t it feel much better having it settled?”

Ryuko nodded, seeming to purposefully push herself even further in. Satsuki let out the softest of little noises when she – oh no, “Ryuko? What’re you doing?”

“I’m sorry,” She lifted her head, and yes, she had somehow managed to undo a couple of buttons with her teeth, nice and neat, “You just looked so cute. I don’t know why now more than ever.”

“Come here,” Satsuki pulled her up face to face, “Put that mouth to better use.” This time, the kiss was long and deep and came with a sort of buzzing in Satsuki’s head. Ryuko’s hunger grew even fiercer then, with a flush of relief at the realization that the joys this weekend had brought wouldn’t end. That meant then, what reason did they have not to go all the way?

She sat up, wrapping an arm around Satsuki’s prone midriff so her back arched, and put her tongue into the kiss even more fiercely. Satsuki let out a deep exhalation through her nose and noise half between a moan and a muffled, girlish giggle. Again she felt a swirl of emotions she’d never known before – completely under the spell of Ryuko’s sudden burst of enthusiasm. *So this is how Ryuko shows her excitement, now that our affair won’t end tomorrow. How wonderful!*

When they finally parted for breath she gasped and said, “I want you to know this: even if the ring on my finger doesn’t belong to you, you’ll always own my heart.”

“Geez, what is this a movie? I know that you dumbass!” She said with a grin, and just then managed to get another button open on Satsuki’s blouse and shove her hand right onto Satsuki’s bare skin, eliciting a little surprised noise. “I’ll treat it gentle, I promise.”

Satsuki suddenly became aware she was losing some kind of race when she felt precise fingers unclasp her bra, and her hands flew to Ryuko’s shirt, yanking it up her body until it caught below her breasts. After that flurry of activity they paused, and Satsuki looked to Ryuko’s eyes, realizing she was jealous of how in-sync Ryuko’s instincts were. Hers were pounding into her head with a heartbeat that drowned everything out. “What are we doing here?” she asked, surprised to see herself doing this.

“Well, what’s to stop us now? If we’re gonna see each other again, why not?”

“No but – you’re serious?”

“Very. And besides, we gotta make sure you’re trained for your Aussie betrothed, right?” Ryuko quipped with a mischievous grin, but she was suddenly aware that Satsuki might be nervous. She was lucky her first time had been with Mako, both of their first times, and more experimentation than anything. But Satsuki was lucky too, because her first time would be with someone who knew what she was doing.

“Yes... I suppose it’s time. Although just to clarify – that’s only a possibility,” Satsuki said as she finished unbuttoning and taking off her blouse. Ryuko took her shirt off as well, and for a moment they stared at each other again, bare stomachs pressed against each other. The taste of Satsuki’s lips, mingled with the wine from dinner, filled Ryuko’s mouth like melted chocolate.

*She doesn’t know what to do, poor thing.*

“Don’t stress about it, okay? Just do what comes naturally.”

“Naturally, yes,” Satsuki murmured, and when Ryuko bent back to unclasp her own bra her lips leapt to the base of Ryuko’s neck, and she was rewarded by a high-pitched gasp. There it was – that angelic turn to Ryuko’s voice that had broken her resolve back then. Through the door it had been ethereal, airy ; in person, it was something else entirely. Something musky and heavy with desire.

“Ah! *Sats!*” She shouldn’t have been surprised that Satsuki would be a natural, but she still couldn’t believe it. *Have to pay her back for that one*, she thought dizzily as her bra hit the ground next to her and she dove back on top of Satsuki, running her hands all along her body. And when her fingers grazed along one of Satsuki’s nipples and her breathing went labored and noisy, she knew she’d done just that.

But there was still tension in Satsuki’s shoulders. *Right, first time. I have to take it careful here, slow and steady.* But it was hard to fight back her excitement that this was really happening, or the pounding desire that had reached a fever pitch now. Her legs and

back twitched uncomfortably, probably because she was pinching a nerve laying on her side, but it felt like they were demanding that she get on with it already.

“Okay, I’m gonna start now, you ready?”

“Start?” Satsuki asked breathily, *isn’t this it?* Ryuko had a hold on her skirt and underwear at once, and as she pulled them down Satsuki’s thighs all the instincts, she’d been doing so well to keep under control went wild. The burning feeling had become arousal – a sensation Satsuki had never learned to embrace, only drive away.

*Wait, this is happening too fast!*

*We haven’t thought this through!*

*Why is she doing this to me! What’s happening to me!*

Those three overpowering instincts – fight back, let it happen, enjoy it - warred in her, underneath conscious thought, and before Satsuki knew what was happening it was over. The moment Ryuko dug her fingers into the smooth, firm muscle of Satsuki’s inner thigh one of them won out: fight back.

“Hey!” Ryuko shouted in surprise as Satsuki’s hand shot up of it’s own volition and stiff-armed her back by the shoulder. “What the hell Sats!” But when she noticed the look of fright on Satsuki’s face, everything came back to her. Not just that this was her first time, but all the horrible stuff that she *knew* but had never *confirmed* that Ragyo had done to her.

*Oh God. What have I done?*

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” They both said at once, then both opened their mouths to say “*Why are you apologizing*”, but Satsuki realized it was going to happen so only Ryuko spoke.

“Why the hell are you apologizing Sats?” Ryuko said, rolling off her. Any thoughts of sex were banished instantly at the thought of how awful that experience must have been from Satsuki’s point of view.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Satsuki murmured. She barely noticed that Ryuko’s bare breasts were pressed up against her shoulders. Compared to everything that had just happened that felt very natural now.

“I-I mean no shit, but what choice did I leave you?”

“No, you misunderstand,” Satsuki sighed, “That was involuntary, I tried to stop it.”

“Oh... so you didn’t think that I was, y’know, doing something you didn’t want?”

Satsuki shook her head insistently. Ryuko looked like she was going to cry again. *Maybe she does do cry too often around me.* “If anything, everything was just moving a little too fast.”



Ryuko looked at her pointedly “*And you’re saying that isn’t something you didn’t want*”, and she smiled back weakly, “No, no don’t worry. It was just... a lot all at once. Pure muscular reaction on my part. Now come here,” She held out her arms, and Ryuko fell back into them.

“I’m still gonna feel bad though. I wasn’t thinking. Y’know, about... erm... what your upbringing was like.”

Satsuki sighed, “You know, don’t you?”

“I can guess.”

“Of course, and it’s better than you do know everything. Someday, I’ll tell you exactly what it was like living in Ragyo Kiryuin’s household. But not today,” She rolled her head back to look at the ceiling, where the gods looked back at her, splendidly peaceful. *But in the myths, they were never peaceful for long. I suppose there’s always blood under the gilding.* “It’s funny, really. I spend so long conditioning myself so that I couldn’t be exploited through sex. But now that I have a chance to be a – reasonably – normal adult, my body has betrayed me. I feel terrible. I know how much it means to you.”

“What? Don’t sweat it. Take all the time you need. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

“Hmm,” Satsuki hummed and kissed the top of Ryuko’s head. But it was like she could hear that glossy voice taunting her in the back of her mind. “*You’ll never be normal, foolish girl. What you have done leaves stains that can’t be washed away.*”

“Actually, to hell with that!” Satsuki suddenly declared, sitting up. “Since when does Satsuki Kiryuin run from her problems, or wait for them to solve themselves? I will face this head on, and become a functioning adult and a worthy lover for you the way I have always done! Let’s go again.”

“Uh, are you sure?” Ryuko asked, but she was still tickled by that sudden outburst. *Yes. Fuck yeah Satsuki.*

“Absolutely. Although... perhaps it would be better if I took the reins, at least at first. Strategically speaking, I think being pinned down underneath you was a bit overwhelming.”

“Well sure, but you said yourself you don’t have any experience. So...”

“Not much. But there is one thing,” *Do I dare? Am I really going to try this?*

*What better way to prove she has no power over me anymore.*

“I promise it won’t disappoint.”

~~~~~

While Satsuki was preparing – running the bath until the room filled with steam, lighting incense – her phone rang. This was expected, and she took it out into the bedroom

where Ryuko laid naked on the bed, waiting.

~“Hey, how’s it going?”~ Nonon’s voice piped through merrily, along with tinny classical music. She must’ve been in her office at the new parliament building – she’d installed a bunch of speakers there

“Oh, quite fine. I feel very much refreshed. I’ll preempt you asking and say I will not be home this evening,” Ryuko grinned in approval at that, and Satsuki tried her best to give a cute thumbs-up.

~“Alright, no problem. What’re the odds something goes wrong before tomorrow morning?”~ Nonon giggled.

“Don’t talk like that. You know I’m not superstitious, but that pricks the hairs on even my neck.”

“Who’re ya talkin’ to?” Ryuko asked. Loudly. Loudly enough that Nonon heard.

“Never you mind, dear,” Satsuki waved dismissively. “In any case, you have command of the armed forces in my absence. I trust that if anything should go wrong you will be prepared.”

~“Oh yeah, don’t worry. I’m staying up late with Houka anyway – paperwork and shit. Oh, and Shiro’s finished up with that big science report he’s been making such a stink about lately.”~

“Lovely. Well, have a pleasant evening Nonon.”

~” You.. too?”~ Nonon said as they hung up, leaving her sitting in her office alone with her music and a sudden realization.

Holy shit, that was a girl’s voice! Satsuki brought a girl on her vacation! She called her ‘dear’! Satsuki has a girlfriend!

Why didn’t she ever tell anyone?

Wait, didn’t that sound a lot like... Ryuko?

Why wouldn’t she tell anyone she was bringing Ryuko?

Ryuko just had a big fight with Rei...

Oh no...

[Nonon, calm down. I’m sure it isn’t what you’re thinking.] Saiban chirped in.

Nah, you’re right. After all, even now Satsuki gets annoyed at her so often...

But then something Satsuki said a long time ago over lunch came back to her:

"I didn't know if I wanted to kiss her or kill her half the time."

Oh fuck. Oh holy shit no. She wouldn't. She wouldn't dare.

But then... they are both Kiryuins.

~~~~~

"Incense and everything, huh? You really went all out with this," Ryuko said as Satsuki led her into the bathroom. It was quite a large, lavish affair befitting of a manor's master bedroom, with Ivy-lined columns around the central tub. Steam poured out of it in such prodigious quantities that even from a few feet away Ryuko's body was broken down to a mere silhouette to Satsuki's eyes (Ryuko's supersenses let her see just fine, but the misty atmosphere wasn't lost on her anyway).

"Please, immerse yourself. I'm sure you'll find the water quite comfortable," Satsuki held out an inviting hand, and Ryuko stepped over the rim of the tub and settled herself.

"Damn, that's pretty hot for human standards," Ryuko said, noticing that Satsuki's feet in were already turning faintly red. She could take it though, of course, "Uh, so you said you had one trick you knew. How, uh, how does this work?"

"Oh, you needn't worry yourself about that," Satsuki smiled in the smuggest possible way. Much more smug than she was feeling, but sometime all you needed was just to act how you wanted and your feelings would shape themselves accordingly. "Just relax... lay back..." Satsuki pushed Ryuko back until only her face was above the water's surface. The red in her hair glowed bioluminescent underwater. Satsuki leaned in close to her ear and whispered:

"And let me purify you."

Ryuko had barely any time to gasp, and then it began. A tweak of the skin there, a grazing of the underside of the knee, the slightest pinch to her nipples, the softest tracing of the lines of her belly. It all came so easy to Satsuki, who'd experienced the same thing so many hundreds of times. She made each motion with the careful focus of a masseuse, and with each it felt like a little bit of the terror died. Apparently, this was something anybody could just do. Not some horrible life-fiber brainwashing trick. Just good sex. She blotted out all thought of how she was feeling.

It was remarkably like her way of steeling herself before she took a life. Only so much more hopeful. This time she would pass through the other side into a whole new world.

And sex wasn't even the right word for it. To Ryuko, each tiny touch stood out like a bolt of lightning. The floating of the water, the heat, the smell, the steam, it clouded out everything into a remarkably effective sensory deprivation chamber. And she couldn't help but gasp at every little touch. Gasps in that angelic voice that drove Satsuki wild.

“Yes, that’s right Ryuko,” She murmured, enjoying this far more than she thought she would. Just the thought that for Ryuko this was something pure and beautiful, how it was meant to be before Ragyo’s filth corrupted it, filled her with immense satisfaction.

“In the end, even you turn out to be a creature just like the rest of us, subject to the same... impulses... and needs,” and that satisfaction made it somehow okay when her free hand found it’s way between her legs, started a back and forth motion that seemed to satiate the burning arousal she’d been so shocked by before.

“I hope you’re okay with that. I wish it hadn’t taken me that so long...” Her other hand was creeping down Ryuko’s inner thigh. She squirmed and made the most plaintive whimper, but despite herself she kept from crying out so she didn’t spoil the moment.

“... To realize that can be something...” *It’s time now*, Satsuki thought, her hand lingering just a moment before the final touch. *What will it feel like? Can I really do this?* And then, just the same as she had the first time she stabbed someone, she decided with all the force of her will.

“... Good...” She was on the edge herself. All she wanted to hear was Ryuko shout in that voice.

*I guess there’s only one way to find out!* She thought, and all of a sudden her fingers were inside Ryuko.

From that point on it took mere seconds. Ryuko barely knew it herself, but her arousal had reached its peak, and she was awarded with a climax unlike anything she’d ever know.

Pleasure wasn’t even the right word. This was something else.

She was *melting*. Her last thoughts as she gave way to a perfect white void of bliss were of how perfect all of this was.

For Satsuki, the next moment was far less enjoyable. Her climax came shortly after, thudding through her body in a way she wasn’t at all used to or ready for. It was a primal, fearsome thing, and it felt like all her blood was pulsing in unison, straining against the walls of her body. In her skull the throbbing was like a wet rag on the brain. Drowning out thought in a steady rhythm.

And that was what scared Satsuki as she fell against the bathtub wall, lying next to Ryuko, panting just as hard as her, if not more so. For the umpteenth time that day, she had no answer as to what the hell was happening to her. Was this her punishment for the forbidden technique? For her incestuous love? *Why does this feel good, but also so frightening.*

For clarity, what Ryuko had just experience was a form of meditation-aided sex, producing a result quite unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. What Satsuki had was just a normal, plain-old orgasm. But all Ragyo had ever done to her was the purification ritual – so to her this was a novel experience too.

And when Ryuko came to she found Satsuki still hyperventilating a little, a stricken look on her face.

“Ohohoho my *God!* Sats what the hell *was* that? Sats! Hey, hang on now!”

As she swept Satsuki into her arms it seemed to bring her back to reality, “Ryuko!”

“You alright?” Ryuko asked, but even though Satsuki nodded she didn’t speak for a while.

“... Just need to... catch my breath... oh, this *steam!*” She hissed, frustrated to seem so weak in what should’ve been a moment of victory.

“Yeah, good point,” Ryuko decided to be level headed for once. “Let’s get out of here.”

Once they were back out into the open air where Satsuki could breath better, she managed to claw back some composure. It was difficult to do with Ryuko’s completely naked body lying right next to hers, but she managed, “Well, how did you like the purity ritual?”

“Purity ritual? I mean yeah, wow that was... intense. I can’t even think of how the *hell* that even happened! It was like I died and went heaven.”

“I’m glad,” Satsuki smiled, “Nobody’s ever disputed that. And don’t worry about me. Like I said, it’s a lot all at one for me. I’m just... glad I was able to give you what you deserved.”

Ryuko smiled, but something clicked then. “Wait, don’t *tell* me - that isn’t what -,”

“What Ragyo used to do to me? I hate to say it, but that’s exactly what it is.”

“Wha- I-,” Ryuko could feel her heat jump. But her brain had taken enough shocks that day, “Well-but isn’t that totally messed up? Am I... it isn’t like, I dunno, evil in any way, right?”

“The act itself? Not at all, I believe it comes from traditions of a sect of ancient Greek monks.”

“I mean sure but... why?”

“Why? I said it before, I was going to muscle through this. I guess I thought this was the best way to prove she has no influence over me anymore. And I’d say it worked, by and large. You enjoyed it, and that’s what matters. The rest is just kinks that I can, no, *will* iron out later.”

Ryuko didn’t say anything, and just looked at Satsuki with that sweet affection that Satsuki wondered how she could ever repay. “Well, what its it?” Satsuki eventually asked.

“You’re so brave,” Ryuko whispered, “You believe your own hype, nobody else woulda just powered through like that. I’m just... amazed, really.”

“Hmm. And you call me a sap.”

“I can be one too, if I want,” Ryuko said sleepily. They laid there in the dreamy state of half-sleep that sweeps in after satisfying sex until Ryuko broke the silence.

“You ever get this feeling like sometimes you know what gonna happen in the future, almost like you’d seen it?”

“You mean through pure intuition? I suppose, but truthfully I’ve found data based predictions more useful.”

“Yeah, I figured you would. But, I was just sitting here, and I got this feeling like everything’s gonna be alright for us somehow. Like, someday we’ll be able to date and nobody will care.”

“What a life that would be.”

“What a life that *will* be. And when it happens, don’t hesitate, please. Make me a Kiryuin for real on the spot.”

“Satsuki smiled at her a buried her face in Ryuko’s hair, “I’ll do you one better. Make me a *Matoi* on the spot. If there that day ever comes, we can be one step closer to erasing that horrid name from the face of the earth.”

Ryuko felt like crying happy tears at that suggestion, and she didn’t know why.

# Dressed to Kill: Monday from Hell

## Chapter Summary

And a lovely cliffhanger for part 2 for you all!

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October 2066

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The next morning Ryuko and Satsuki awoke and packed their re things with a vigor that surprised them both. They felt ready to take on whatever the world threw at them, so long as they had each other. But they had no idea what they were driving back into...

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Alarm sirens shocked Nonon and Houka awake. They had bedded down for the night in Nonon's office amidst stacks of paperwork that they'd promised Satsuki they'd take care of. But now something much more urgent was happening.

Nonon had just enough time to wipe the drool from her lips and rearrange her hair before a general rushed in, clearly frightened.

"Commander Jakuzure, Ma'am!" He shouted, "Tokyo is under attack. It's REVOCS. Ultima uniforms, suicide bombers, everything."

"Show me," She said flatly, and at the press of a button the wide TV in her office flashed up a map of the city with five points highlighted. Shipyards, central train station, police base, hospital, hydro plant, "They're going after the infrastructure," She declared. A sudden rush of vigor had come on her. This was what she'd wanted when she accepted Saiban way back when. She was calling the shots, and she had the tools to take care of this.

Any thoughts of the uncomfortable revelation she'd had the night before were banished. She'd make Satsuki proud.

And Saiban was humming too. This meant fighting. Real fighting, not just practice.

"I'm already calling the rest," Houka said, and soon enough the city map was joined by a chat log with everyone's faces appearing – Aikuro and Tsumugu, Uzu and Ira, Shiro, even Rei, ready at attention. She wasted no time.

“We all knew this was gonna happen. They’re back, and it looks like they’re trying to cripple us with an early strike to city infrastructure. I’ve got all your locations, and I’m routing each of you to the nearest attack. Power up and go on foot, you’ll be faster that way.”

~“Right!” ~ They all shouted in unison, flooding the office with sound. They’d all just woken up too, but just like Nonon the severity of the situation wasn’t lost on them. Lives were at stake here. And it was a chance to do some real fighting.

“Uzu! You’ll head down to the waterfront and clear out the shipyards. My map says they’ve got at least one *Huskarl* model there, stay on your toes!”

~“I’ll bring you back a pretty trophy, *my lady*,” ~ He smirked, and in the background you could hear his feet already pattering.

“Aikuro and Tsumugu, you’ll be heading to the train station and police base respectively. Lots of people there, so I’m counting on you to minimize collateral damage.”

~“Huh, never thought I’d hear that from you, ‘little miss blew up half the stadium fighting Ryuko’,” ~ Aikuro quipped.

“Y’know, we’d work better as team if you guys didn’t give me *attitude* at every chance,” Nonon hissed.

~“You’ve got nothing to worry about, commander Jakuzure,” ~ Tsumugu replied, serious as ever. Apparently his Kamui hadn’t made him any less of a true soldier. ~“Citizen safety is our number one priority”~

“Very good. Houka, you and Shiro will take the hospital. I want one of you doing the fighting, the other handling the evacuations.”

“I call fighting!” Houka shouted quickly, and Shiro groaned.

~“No fair, just cuz you’re in the room with her...,” ~

“Tough. And Rei, you’re fastest what with your high compatibility and all, so you’ll do the hydroplant. This city doesn’t handle blackouts well, so we’re counting on you.”

~” Already on it!” ~ Rei had started running as soon as the call began. It felt good to finally be doing something that got her mind off Ryuko.

“And lastly, Ira, I’ll come join you at the prison. We’ll head to wherever needs reinforcements from there.”

~” Commander Jakuzure!” ~ He nodded in affirmative. Nonon and Houka left together, storming down the halls as clerks watched them go like a loose bear was wandering the halls.

“Five locations... Mostly one-stars. They know that’s too much for the police, but we can take care of it easily. This must be a diversion.”



“Yes, keep us separated so they can hit their real target. But where?”

But then the answer hit them both.

“Oh no, the prison.

“Oh fuck, the prison.”

~~~~~

Down at the supermax, Takamori was awoken from fitfull sleep by an unusual sound. A crash, the clunk of falling masonry. The sounds of fighting in the hallway, drawing ever nearer. He could make out the firing of needle guns, the scraping of metal through narrow concrete corridors, and screaming. Lots of screaming, and the wet sound of people dying.

He grinned, chuckling giddily and leaping up to stand in the dead center of his empty room. It was happening. It had always been inevitable. He would never have let them do this to him if he didn't know it was only temporary. That he would have his vengeance.

The sounds of fighting were just outside now, and Takamori could barely contain himself. He dropped to one knee at just the right time. And –

Thud. THUD. THU-CRASH! The thick metal door, strong enough to withstand artillery shells, was pulverized by something greater than strength. A power born of fury and the scratching of ravenous red claws

Smoke billowed through the hole, filling the air with rays of red light, and through that smoke, a silhouette.

A women wrapped in red and white bloodstained cloth, so tight her ribs were showing. Great rounded pearls on her shoulders, in the center of which lay eyes with the serenely cruel gaze of a god. Her face contorted into a snarling, predatory grin.

Tears of exhilaration ran down Takamori's unshaven cheeks. Inevitably, they had been drawn back together. His Minazuki, and now so much more. She was part of something greater now.

“I have come for you,” The words escaped what had once been her mouth, and he felt them wash over him like a wave. Who could doubt now, the primordial truth of destiny?

“My Lady Rosuketsu... You're more beautiful than I ever imagined.”

I just want to leave a quick thanks on this for all of you who've gotten through the whole damn thing. I'm amazed there's anyone who's done it at all. Seeing comments from readers on this work is always a joy for me, and I want to continue making the best Kill la Kill post-canon "novelization" I can.

To that end, if you have anything you'd like to say in terms of feedback this is your reminder. I want to make part two great, and everything, even if it's just "I liked X, I didn't like Y" will help me know how.

I really don't mean this in the fishing for complements sense either. Tear me a new one. If you're someone who doesn't really like it skipping ahead to see the ending I REALLY want to know what parts didn't work for you, even if it's just not your type of fic.

My dream is that when the whole thing is done the fandom can look at it and say "that's as close to an official continuation as we'll ever get". If you want something like that to exist, please help me get there.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!